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**Cultural and Social Capital in University Choice: Intra-class  
Differences Amongst Working-class Students in a Sixth Form  
College.**

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Thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Education (EdD)

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## **Abstract**

### **Background**

Research on the way that sixth-form students utilise cultural and social capital when applying to university has suggested that students make differential choices on the basis of social class. Research has also highlighted the significance of intra-class differences amongst middle-class students. It suggests the extent to which family, school, peers, and the media may influence and impact on choices.

### **Aim**

This research examines the extent to which students from similar socio-economic backgrounds, and in particular 'working-class' students, make choices. This process is examined in terms of the university and course choices made and associated social advantage and prestige.

### **Methods**

This research employs an interpretative paradigm using qualitative methods and a conceptual framework derived from Bourdieu. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were used to investigate research questions and a grounded approach to data analysis was utilised.



## **Findings**

Findings suggest that access to cultural and social capital is limited to familial influence. Students were influenced by their parents in differential ways, but also drew on the experience of their siblings. However, it was noted that the college environment had a limited impact on student decisions. When making choices the most notable themes linked to general locality, where respondents were fairly polarised in their desire to 'stay local' or 'move away'.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Locational preference linked to degree of geographical cultural knowledge and led to the development of a new theoretical concept that I term *locational capital*. This corresponded to intentions to avoid certain locations such as 'the rural' or 'the provincial' and provides a new way of understanding choice. These geographical constructions, linked to perceptions concerning Higher Education Institutions, often triggered concerns regarding 'fitting-in' and 'social class' and for many resulted in limitations on choice. This imposed a limitation on applying to prestigious HEIs.

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# 1. Introduction

Notions of different kinds of capital and their impact on educational outcomes stem from the work of Bourdieu (1998; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1998) who addresses the tripartite relationship between economic, social and cultural capital. Much has been written to show that those who lack economic capital are disadvantaged in terms of educational achievement (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Douglas, 1964; Halsey *et al.*, 1980; Palmer *et al.*, 2007). However, I wish to examine the often less tangible notions of cultural and social capital to investigate the extent to which these influence choice. This derives from a concern, identified through supporting students, that many students are not making the most of opportunities available to them, although often they have the economic capacity to do so.

My interest in this area links to my professional practice and to a desire to enable people to participate in education in order to reduce social exclusion. In the past I have examined the extent to which adult students on Access programmes tap into social capital to empower them to gain maximum benefit from educational provision. I wish to apply similar concepts to sixth-form students to assess the benefit gained from social capital, cultural capital and subsequent impact on choice.

The specific aim of this research is to establish the extent to which sixth-form students have access to, and utilise, non-economic capital in potentially differential ways to inform the process of applying to university through the Universities and Colleges

Admissions Service (UCAS). This is a significant concern because such higher education choices can have a substantial impact on students in terms of educational outcomes and prestige. Such concerns stem from my own experiences as a practitioner advising sixth-form students. Part of the aim of the research is to establish students' own perspectives in relation to choice, rather than investigating statistical correlations between socio-economic criteria and choice.

Preliminary research questions are derived from both initial reading and my experiences as a practitioner in a sixth form college. Here I undertake a senior pastoral role with responsibility for UCAS applications. This has given rise to an interest in the decision making process that students adopt when choosing where and what to study in Higher Education (HE). Furthermore, my experience of this process indicates that students understand and choose Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in significantly different ways and this gives rise to my preliminary research questions. They are further examined and then synthesised through the examination of literature, which in turn broadly indicates a possible methodology for practical investigation. The research employs an interpretive paradigm using qualitative methods, analysed using the ideas of Bourdieu in order to respond research questions.

The following three chapters examine a range of research that relates to non-economic capital, choice and socio-economic position. It is organised specifically in relation to the preliminary research questions that focus on the extent to which policy and practice have an impact, inter-class and intra-class differences in terms of choice and the use of social

and cultural capital, and access to social and cultural capital. Finally, research questions and the focus of the research are reviewed in the light of literature examined in preparation for consideration of the research methodology and the primary research.

## **Preliminary research questions**

### **Policy background**

1. To what extent have policy and practice influenced the involvement of potential applicants from lower socio-economic groups in HE?

### **Key research questions**

2. How do potential applicants from different socio-economic backgrounds decide if, where and what to study? In what different ways do they understand and use HE? (Inter-class differences)
3. How do potential applicants from similar socio-economic backgrounds, in particular working-class backgrounds decide if, where and what to study? In what different ways do they understand and use HE? (Intra-class differences)

### **Conceptual framework**

4. To what extent do potential applicants have access to and employ social and cultural capital in making decisions about HE? Is this related to social class?



## **2. Policy Background**

**To what extent have policy and practice influenced the involvement of potential applicants from lower socio-economic groups in Higher Education (HE)?**

### **2.1 Historical context**

The last sixty years or so have seen a monumental increase in the higher education sector, both in terms of participation and the corresponding number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Government policy and the need for a more highly qualified workforce has driven such change as has the increased birth rate linked to a public desire for increased participation (Chitty, 2009). Despite such an increase to a point of 'mass' participation, inequalities linked to socio-economic background or social class still persist and link to both participation and choice.

In overall terms participation in higher education in the United Kingdom at undergraduate level now accounts for approximately 1.8 million students, with 1,108,685 undertaking full-time undergraduate degrees (Higher Education Funding Council England, 2010, p. 19.) across a range of 165 HEIs including 131 in England (Higher Education Funding Council England, 2010, p. 8.). The higher education sector has seen significant change in recent years as well as in more historical terms.



In the nineteenth century participation in higher education in the United Kingdom was low, with primarily only men in limited numbers from upper and middle class elite backgrounds attending. The number of HEIs was also limited in 1900 with seven HEIs for England and Wales (Matheson, 2008, pp. 277-279.). In the late 1930s less than 2% of young people went to university, and these were predominately men. This increased slightly, after the post-war dip, to 3.7% of 18 year olds in 1948 (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993, pp. 197-198.), however this nevertheless remained a provision for the wealthy and continued to be largely confined to men.

From the mid-1950s onwards university participation significantly increased, showing 'almost continuous growth' (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993, p. 199.), as did the range of HEIs. This in part is a consequence of increased Level Three performance in GCE Advanced Levels, which added to the numbers of those with the appropriate qualifications for university entry. However this is also a consequence of increased funding in the late 1950s to enable more students to move away from home. From 1956 to 1964 those achieving A Level passes roughly doubled, and by the late 1950s approximately 80 per cent of students in England and Wales received some financial support. Numbers were supported by the establishment of new university colleges, although these did not meet demand (Chitty, 2009, p. 198.). Matheson (2008) points to the Age Participation Index (API) which measures the percentage of 18-19 year olds undertaking full-time undergraduate education. In 1950 the API stood at three per cent, but by 1960 (prior to Robbins) it had increased to five per cent (Matheson, 2008, p. 279.). The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) has now superseded the

API. This measures initial HE participation by 17-30 year olds (Department for Business, 2012; Uk Statistics Authority, 2010).

## **2.2 The Anderson and Robbins Reports**

Subsequent to further changes in policy and funding, discussed below and linked to The Anderson Report (Anderson, 1960) and The Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963), participation rose further “from 9.5 per cent in 1963 to 14.3 per cent in 1967” which accounts for approximately 40,000 students (Chitty, 2009, p. 202.), although Chitty notes that this was lower than participation rates in comparable western economies. It is also worth noting that this relates to full-time students. Part-time participation also increased in a broad range of areas, including external degrees, and so not primarily in terms of prestigious institutions (Halsey, 1992b). Nevertheless participation increased through the 1970s and 1980s and by 1987 the API had increased to 15 per cent with further increases taking it to 35 per cent by 2001 (Matheson, 2008, p. 279.).

According to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) the young participation rate, which approximately corresponds to those eligible to progress to Higher Education (HE) typically at age 18, increased to 36 per cent by the late 2000s (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2010, p.1.). Also in 2007 overall participation, for all 18-30 year olds, ran at 39 per cent (Chitty, 2009, p. 213.). In a recent report The Office for Fair Access established that in overall terms higher education has been successful in widening participation claiming that the most underprivileged socio-economic groups have increased participation and higher groups

have, for the first time, increased at a lower rate (Office for Fair Access, 2010, p. 6.). Their findings are partly based on a recent Higher Education Funding Council for England Report (2010) that found that:

The proportion of young people living in the most disadvantaged areas who enter higher education has increased by around +30 per cent over the last five years, and by +50 per cent over the last 15 years (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2010, p. 2.).

The Office for Fair Access links such a situation to improvements in GCSEs as well as the introduction of Education Maintenance Allowance and *AimHigher* initiatives.

In terms of government policy on intervention and influence on higher education a number of important reports and legislative measures have a noteworthy impact on higher education both in terms of changing values towards education and corresponding changes to the structure of HE. In particular the Anderson Committee Report (Anderson, 1960) and The Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963) are significant. The Anderson Report proposed financial measures to support students, which were correspondingly acted on by government through the implementation of mandatory means-tested grants for those in full-time education (Matheson, 2008), and the Robbins Report, responding to concerns about ‘elite’ participation in higher education, established a key principle (‘the Robbins Principle’) suggesting that “courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do

so” (Robbins, 1963, p. 8.). As such it contributed to a view that HE could combat social disadvantage and should strive for equality of opportunity.

The Robbins Report made an immediate impact on educational policy, perhaps because a general election was imminent, but also because it was regarded as important on social and economic grounds and because it highlighted continuing disadvantage for lower socio-economic groups. In response to the report, “not only were the recommendations accepted but they have been carried out in all sectors” (Layard *et al.*, 1969, p. 22.) which included the expansion of higher education including teacher training. Chitty notes that it “launched the most massive expansion of higher education ever seen in Britain” (Chitty, 2009, p. 198). However, although Robbins made an impact, some quite significant impact had already been achieved in the late 1950s and early 1960s, suggesting that Robbins was not the catalyst for change that some suggest (Edwards, 1980; Edwards, 1982). In terms of implementation the expansion did not follow what Robbins envisaged. In a response to the report under the Wilson-led Labour government of 1964–70 higher education was developed as part of a ‘binary policy’ which split higher education into an autonomous university sector and a public local authority sector (Chitty, 2009), and fundamentally went against Robbins’ proposals for a unitary system. Nevertheless sector expansion continued. In terms of emphasis however, the rhetoric and impetus changed from a focus on ‘equality of opportunity’ in the 1950s and 1960s to a focus on ‘widening participation’ by the late 1970s. This also became the emphasis of legislation (Matheson, 2008).

In more recent years the drive to increase participation has certainly been adopted by both Conservative and Labour governments. Ward and Eden (2009) point to two drivers in relation to this: “to offer equality of opportunity and to provide the skills for the expanding global knowledge economy” (Ward and Eden, 2009, p. 162.). By the late 1980s the HE sector had significantly expanded and constituted an autonomous university sector together with a similar number of Polytechnics and HE Colleges under Council for National Academic Awards (CNNA) and Local Education Authority (LEA) control (Chitty, 2009). The 1988 Education Act removed LEA control encouraging the overall HE sector to be more ‘entrepreneurial’ and in 1992 the Further and Higher Education Act unified the HE sector in terms of funding through the Higher Education Funding Council England (2010). This allowed the majority of providers to award their own degrees (Chitty, 2009) and unified the Further Education (FE) College sector under the Further Education Funding Councils in England and Wales.

## **2.3 The Dearing Report**

The Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997) pointed to inequality in participation rates for different groups and gave a renewed urgency to the need for widening participation. It made recommendations in order to facilitate wider access and enable disadvantaged groups to succeed. Subsequent government priorities and policies in response to Dearing, outlined in *The Learning Age: The Renaissance for a New Britain* (Department for Education and Employment, 1998) sought to “reach out and include those from groups that have been underrepresented... [including those from]... semi-skilled or unskilled family backgrounds and certain ethnic minorities” (Gayle *et al.*, 2002, p. 5.).

Universities were given extra funding to support their activities and initiatives to widen participation including *AimHigher* to target students in more disadvantaged groups (Office for Fair Access, 2010). The drive also links to the 1997 Labour government target that sought to achieve a 50 per cent higher education participation rate by 2010 (Ward and Eden, 2009). Further changes in 1998 introduced through the Teaching and Higher Education Act introduced tuition fees to the HE sector (Chitty, 2009). The Green Paper in 2002, *Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (Department for Education and Skills, 2002) pointed to continued unequal access to HE, with “less than 20 per cent of young people under the age of 21 from lower socio-economic groups... [going] to university, compared to over 70 per cent from the highest” (Chitty, 2009, p. 205.; Department for Education and Skills, 2002). This further acknowledgement that problems of access existed strengthened a Labour Party commitment to widening participation, although Chitty notes that the Labour Party did *not* acknowledge that the introduction of tuition fees was a significant factor in deterring participation from lower socio-economic groups (Chitty, 2009).

Subsequently the Government introduced a White Paper in 2003, and the 2004 Higher Education Act in an attempt to widen access. This in part was an acknowledgement that more needed to be done to maintain a 50 per cent participation target. The White Paper: *The Future of Higher Education* outlined the proposals that would later appear in the Act. They include the following:

raising the aspirations of young people through the *Aim Higher* programme; good quality accessible 'second-chance' routes into higher education; fairer admissions procedures; better benchmarks for institutions to monitor widening participation; reintroducing grants to those from the poorest families; abolishing up-front tuition fees; and allowing universities to set their own fees (Department for Education and Skills, 2003; Matheson, 2008, p. 289.).

It is perhaps obvious, but important to note, that in the United Kingdom as well as elsewhere changes in the education system and policies that facilitate such change need to be seen in the light of the changing nature of the labour market. One could see this relationship as interactive and, as Blackburn and Jarman (1993) note, labour demand, university expansion and social change are interlinked. One might begin to see this as a self-fulfilling prophecy. This requires further consideration.

## **2.4 The labour market**

The labour market has increasingly required a more educated workforce as it has shifted to a service and technology base that requires technical and professional skills. This has also been backed by the perspective or philosophy of successive governments that see HE expansion as an economic necessity and also see this as a means to 'social justice' (Keep and Mayhew, 2004, p. 298.). The skills HE provides could be derived from different sources and means of education and training, however in the UK they tend to follow a high status university model and, as suggested earlier, this has favoured

those from higher status backgrounds. Thurow (1974) suggests that university graduates are attractive to employers because they demonstrate an ability to learn quickly. It has been a government position that some kind of highly educated workforce is required for a modern and efficient economy (Keep and Mayhew, 2004), however the extent to which large numbers of graduates are required needs exploring. Graduate employment may not be solely economically instrumental but could serve other purposes. Whilst recruitment reinforces and protects professional standing (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993), HE also serves different purposes: it recruits socially similar candidates for entry to the professions, but also seems to create those individuals:

The more good jobs go to graduates, the greater is the demand to enter university and the competition reinforces the perception of universities as the educational location of top activity (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993, pp. 202-203.).

Consequently over time as the take-up of undergraduate education has increased so has an increase in the belief, founded or not, that degrees are a marker of ability. This has undeniably fuelled a rise in 'self-perpetuating credentialism' within many employment sectors (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993).

One possible problem with HE expansion is the extent to which this could diminish other sectors of education. This could impact on the vocational education sector diminishing the pool of talent available for technical education and adding to a situation



where those entering vocational education often have weak qualifications and often come from working class families (Keep and Mayhew, 2004). This then points to a socio-economic polarisation in terms of educational routes. Higher numbers in HE do not automatically link to 'economic success' and recent increases may not have benefitted the economy but might be rooted in a blind assumption that HE qualifications "are an unqualified good" (Keep and Mayhew, 2004, p. 300.). One can question the orthodox view that links HE participation to economic success, raising the issue that graduate skills are underutilised and a need for graduates overestimated (Keep and Mayhew, 2004). However, due to increasing credentialism, and regardless of the need for the skills that graduate education provides, employers will ask for qualifications and obtain the best qualified they can. Consequently the system remains self-perpetuating, "rather like buying a lottery ticket, purchase does not mean you will win, but, without a ticket you cannot win" (Keep and Mayhew, 2004, p. 304.). The Government reflects this approach and continues to emphasise the importance of HE entry (Department for Education and Skills, 2002) and seek to improve progression to HE through vocational routes (Denholm and Macleod, 2003). It would therefore seem to be a case of 'all roads lead to HE' – even in the vocational or work based learning sectors. In any event regardless of the rate of participation and level of qualifications or 'credentials' there is a shortfall in the number of good jobs that require graduates (Goos and Manning, 2003).

## **2.5 Inequalities**

In terms of the accessibility of higher education overall participation rates have increased over the last fifty years. However, increasing participation has not removed

inequalities in access. Participation can be linked to factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity and age. The higher education landscape in contemporary Britain sees improved participation rates for many groups. In terms of gender, women have higher levels of participation than men, with women accounting for 56.4% of all higher education students in 2010/11 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2012a). Ethnic minority participation is also increasing with 18.1% of new entrants to higher education in 2009/10 being recruited from ethnic minorities (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2012a). Older students also increasingly participate, with 56% of part-time degree students aged over 30 years (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2012a). The focus for my research concerns social class and its relationship to participation. This will now be explored in more depth.

Whilst statistical measures utilised in different comparisons and reports of participation rates are often difficult to compare, as the criteria utilised vary, social class has a demonstrable and significant impact on participation. For example, whereas gender inequalities have reduced, even in relation to elite institutions, one could argue that this is not significantly the case with social class. Whilst expansion has occurred inequalities persist and “more prestigious institutions remain the cultural possession of traditionally advantaged groups” (Egerton and Halsey, 1993, p. 183.). This situation persists and in terms of the most sought after HEIs participation remains largely the preserve of an elite (The Sutton Trust, 2011).

In the pre and post-war period the children of manual workers had a poor chance of attending university and pupils from the Registrar General's social class one and two (professional and intermediate occupations) were roughly five times more likely to attend university than other social groups (Marsh and Blackburn, 1992). Even during significant expansion in the late 1950s the beneficiaries of increased participation were still an elite group of mainly middle class students (Chitty, 2009, p. 198.). This is reflected in the Oxford Mobility Study (Halsey *et al.*, 1980) which suggests that whilst participation increased, a social class divide widened. However even where policy documents, such as The Robbins Report (1963), proposed a unitary system as a means of reducing inequalities, activities by the Labour administration – in terms of its binary division between a university sector and a 'public' sector – maintained or reinforced a social class divide. Chitty goes further suggesting Labour's approach was a 'deliberate repudiation of Robbins' (Chitty, 2009, p. 200.). Inequalities did decline in the mid-1960s subsequent to the two reports, although many entering were still from relatively high socio-economic groups (Marsh and Blackburn, 1992).

Certainly lower socio-economic groups have made improvements in terms of raw participation rates, and by the 1980s inequalities appear to have slightly declined (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993, p. 205.). However the picture changes further and at a point where higher education involvement significantly increased in the 1990s inequalities in participation on social class grounds also increased. The seeming parity that was established through the 'removal' of the university, Polytechnic and HE College status gap was quickly countered by the more elite universities through the

establishment in 1994 of ‘The Russell Group’, a university mission group devised to support the interests of leading HE providers (Russell Group, 2012) and ‘The 1994 Group’ established to support the interests of smaller, but nevertheless prestigious research-intensive universities (1994 Group, 2012). [See Appendix 6]

Social class participation rates for students from professional family backgrounds, in the upper middle class (e.g. lawyers and accountants), stood at 73 per cent in 1993-4, but had increased to 82 per cent by 1996-7. Similar increases also occurred for students from intermediate class family backgrounds, lower down in the middle class (e.g. managerial and technical occupations), from 42 per cent to 47 per cent over the same period. Whereas any increases for student from lower social class groups, which include skilled non-manual and manual occupations, were either smaller or fairly static (Ball *et al.*, 2002a, p. 53.). Statistical data also show that students from lower social class groups who have been to state schools and who did participate in higher education are less likely to apply to Oxbridge and other ‘old’ pre-1992 HEIs (Ball *et al.*, 2002a). This reflects Robbins’ earlier findings where those who attended grammar schools, and who were often from the middle class, were unlikely to apply to Oxford and Cambridge leaving it primarily the preserve of the independent schools (Robbins, 1963). This is “despite the fact that they are just as likely to be accepted as people from higher [social class] groups” (Ward and Eden, 2009, p. 163.), and against their self-interest, as those who do attend achieve significantly higher earning premiums (Ward and Eden, 2009, p. 163.). So although government targets sought to increase participation to 50 per cent, and notwithstanding broad participation increases, “the likelihood of... [poorer students

undertaking higher education] relative to their richer peers, is actually lower than was the case in earlier decades” (Ward and Eden, 2009, p. 162.).

A range of studies support such a view. It is not the raw number of students attending that is significant, but the way that they are differentiated in terms of the kind of institutions they attend and the corresponding ‘spend-per-student’ for these institutions (Egerton and Halsey, 1993, p. 187.). Consequently students from higher social class groups gain a ‘relative advantage’, although in any case access across all institutions reflects inequalities (Egerton and Halsey, 1993). Chitty also points to a range of evidence (Green, 1988; Labour Party, 1982) suggesting that the rise in participation has predominately benefitted the middle class.

Later as a result of the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 Goddard notes that ‘under-represented groups’ including working class students diminished in number (Goddard, 1999), a finding echoed by The Sutton Trust a year later (The Sutton Trust, 2000) who pointed to academically able state sector candidates failing to gain access to prestigious universities. This is echoed in contemporary research by The Sutton Trust (2011) compiled on the basis of data from The Department for Education, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and Oxbridge. It shows that those from the independent sector maintain a significant advantage as they are twice as likely to be accepted from the most prestigious HEIs, “48.2 per cent of independent school pupils in England were accepted... compared with 18 per cent of pupils in non selective state schools” (The Sutton Trust, 2011, p. 2.). They also point to the top 100 elite schools,

which represent three per cent of all schools with sixth form provision. These schools account “for just under a third (31.9%) of admissions to Oxbridge during three years. These schools are composed of 84 independent schools and 16 grammar schools” (The Sutton Trust, 2011, p. 3.).

Similar patterns are also revealed in research conducted by The Office for Fair Access. They confirm that, in terms of the most prestigious and most selective universities, participation is not widening: “currently talented young women and men from disadvantaged backgrounds who could apply to selective universities, are disproportionately not doing so, so reducing their chances of upward social mobility” (Office for Fair Access, 2010, p. 7.). Further analysis of data derived from HEFCE (2010) points to no increase in participation for lower socio-economic groups at the top third of HEIs, with the “the most advantaged 20 per cent... six times more likely to attend in the mid-1990s... [increasing to] seven times more likely by the mid-2000s” (Office for Fair Access, 2010, p. 17.).

Both Labour and Conservative administrations have accepted inequalities in provision and both have sought to address this issue, although political concerns have done little to clarify the precise nature and detail of any disadvantage. Blackburn and Jarman point to more disadvantaged groups attending ‘lower status courses’ (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993, p.200.), whilst Gayle *et al* (2002) point to a failure of government policies as the less advantaged have not gained access to the most prestigious institutions. They suggest that social class, gender, type of schooling (state or independent), siblings and parental

education all play an important role which has not been addressed by successive governments (Gayle *et al.*, 2002). In particular they suggest that the most significant variable in statistical terms is the occupational social class of the family and point to parents who are graduates as a means to a noteworthy advantage – however they also point to the way that an independent education can mitigate this (Gayle *et al.*, 2002).

Despite some claims that differential advantage in higher education is decreasing, a large scale research project in the early 1990s, points to a continuous and consistent link between higher social class and attendance at prestigious institutions over time (Egerton and Halsey, 1993). In addition, those from lower social class groups are also more likely to attend as mature students (Egerton and Halsey, 1993). This also links to attendance at lower prestige institutions, probably as a result of lower secondary qualifications, which is corroborated by HEFCE who demonstrate that those who are less likely to participate are also found in more deprived neighbourhoods and achieve poorer GCSE results (Higher Education Funding Council England, 2005).

The situation in the early 1990s suggests multiple disadvantage with those in lower social class groups being less likely to attend university, less likely to obtain prestigious qualifications and more likely to attend later in life (Egerton and Halsey, 1993). Higher education remained markedly unequal, with little change since the mid-1960s. However, although the picture is more complex as the traditionally lower occupational groups have diminished in number, in relative terms access remains unequal (Keep and Mayhew, 2004).

In terms of prestige, entrants to first degrees from lower socio-economic groups disproportionately enter post-1992 HEIs, and correspondingly are not proportionally represented in 'old' (pre-1992) HEIs (Keep and Mayhew, 2004). Also, participation from those with manual backgrounds is low with, for example, only "9 per cent penetration" to Oxford and Cambridge (Keep and Mayhew, 2004, p.308.). The economic significance is clear: those from higher socio-economic backgrounds enter higher status institutions and gain more favourable 'labour market outcomes'(Keep and Mayhew, 2004, p. 308.). Keep and Mayhew (2004) also found that "candidates applying to 'blue chip' jobs [jobs in companies with highly rated stocks] from Oxford University were 29 times more likely to be appointed to such work than someone applying from a 'new' (post-1992) university" (Keep and Mayhew, 2004, p. 308.). Government attempts to investigate and redress such a situation have been rebuked by the independent sector and labelled as 'social engineering' (Lucas, 2003).

## **2.6 Conclusion**

It is evident in the last fifty years that educational provision in the higher education sector has undergone significant change. A system of education that only used to be available to a privileged elite now presents considerably wider access to those from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds and participation has significantly increased. However such expansion has not been undertaken in purely equitable terms and many inconsistencies and inequalities remain. Those from higher socio-economic groups routinely gain significant advantage through admissions to prestigious and highly



selective HEIs whereas those from lower socio-economic groups remain underrepresented despite a range of policies over the last fifty years that have sought to create equality of opportunity and widen access. Whilst all socio-economic groups have gained advantage, the relative positions of those in higher and lower groups have remained broadly the same. Increased participation has not resulted in equal opportunities in participation. Whilst initiatives that have sought to increase institutional support for those from lower socio-economic groups have some demonstrable impact, ingrained inequalities that may be the consequence of embodied social class differences might take a long time to change. It may well be the case that working class students have more advantages, but this does not go so far as to provide consistent access to the most prestigious institutions. Although the HE sector has expanded to accommodate the aspirations of students, and indeed politicians – who wish to expand on a significant scale (Johnson, 2003) – the corresponding expansion has not been reflected in the capacity of the most prestigious institutions. In such a restrictive system those from higher socio-economic groups are inevitably favoured as differential advantage is maintained.

### **3. Key Research Questions**

**How do potential applicants from different socio-economic backgrounds decide if, where and what to study? In what different ways do they understand and use Higher Education (HE)?**

#### **3.1 Inter-class differences**

Empirical research has highlighted a range of factors that determine inter-class Higher Education (HE) choices, many of which foreground the importance of social and cultural capital. The higher education landscape has become more complex as a 'mass' system of higher education has emerged and theorising the process of Higher Education choice has become more significant (Reay, 1998; Reay *et al.*, 2010). In terms of HE participation "in 1967 there were just over 50,000 acceptances of HE places" (Reay, 1998, p.519). However in 2008 acceptances had increased to just over 456,000 (University and College Admission Service, 2009). Although a mass system of education has emerged, this does not necessarily indicate the democratisation of education and a range of inequalities are apparent in the system (Reay, 1998). These inequalities specifically relate to attendance at the more prestigious Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), with students from working-class backgrounds more likely to attend lower ranked institutions (Archer *et al.*, 2002; Reay *et al.*, 2010). Reay raises concerns over the differential pathways and experiences that students take. What is suggested is that far from seeing

increasing participation as a marker of increasing equality, higher education is polarized in an unequal process. Further, higher education decisions are complex and require a wide range of choices that are influenced through areas such as “family, school, peer group and the wider community” (Reay, 1998, p.520.). Also noted are the impact of social class, ethnicity and gender as influences on choice, as well as the impact of the media (Reay, 1998; Reay, 2003b). Consequently analysis of choice remains a complex process:

These social changes and the influences they give rise to suggest that higher education choice-making may be a far more intricate, multi-factorial process than traditional surveys of access to university, with their focus on homogenous categories of gender and social class suggest (Reay, 1998, p.520.).

Nevertheless, whilst acknowledging the importance of a more complex approach to choice, this does not mean that social class differences are no longer significant (Reay *et al.*, 2010), as evidence does support a major advantage for those in higher social class groups in particular when gaining places at ‘elite’ universities (Halsey, 1992a). Indeed, arguably the most prestigious mission group, The Russell Group, perform relatively poorly in terms of their recruitment of working class students and in general middle-class students predominately attend the more elite pre-1992 HEIs (Reay *et al.*, 2010). However the possibility of further analysis of intra-class differences nevertheless emerges.

A range of factors impact on the participants that relate to a Bourdieuan theoretical framework, as discussed above (Crozier *et al.*, 2011; Reay, 1998). *Habitus* moderates the way that individuals internalise experiences of social structures, and hence the possible actions and adaptations that they make in the light of their experiences. In response to *habitus* students ‘inherit’ or ‘possess’ a fluctuating degree of cultural capital that, according to Bourdieu can constitute:

practical or theoretical knowledge of the fluctuations of the market in academic qualifications...[that]...enables...the best return on inherited cultural capital in the scholastic market (Bourdieu, 1998, p.142.).

Consequently one of the criteria that ‘successful’ higher education choosers possess is being aware of the subjects that are most marketable in career terms. It is also noteworthy that certain elite higher education institutions also provide a marketable value, regardless of subject, with the HEI chosen having primacy over any subject chosen for some middle-class applicants (Reay, 1998). This can be contrasted with responses from ethnic minority, working-class and comprehensive school students who lack such cultural capital (Reay, 1998), although middle-class students who attend comprehensive schools see the relevance of and make successful applications to ‘good’ HEIs (Crozier *et al.*, 2011). In contrast working-class students often choose HEIs that both they and others see as second rate (Reay, 2003b; Reay *et al.*, 2010) and these tend to be concentrated in the lower half of the university league tables (Macrae and Maguire,

2002). The knowledge that facilitates well or poorly informed choices, and the access to this knowledge appears to be significant. One clear factor that emerges that has a marked impact on choice and the way that applicants prepare for HE is a parental or family history of participation in higher education (Crozier and Reay, 2011; Crozier *et al.*, 2011; James *et al.*, 2010; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). Working-class parents have limited experience of HE and so find it more difficult to support their children when making HE choices (Archer *et al.*, 2002). Whereas, candidates who come from more traditional middle-class backgrounds and have a family history of HE attendance have less anxiety than their working-class peers when it comes to making choices. They draw on familial experience and provide a wealth of “cultural, academic and social capital” (Reay, 2003b). Parental participation in HE can impact in terms of both inter-class and intra-class differences. In particular Reay (1998) links this to intra-class differences within the middle class, this is discussed in more detail later.

Knowledge of education and higher education in particular also relates directly to cultural capital and suggests that working class students are at a disadvantage and uncertain concerning this field of knowledge. Middle-class parents often have extensive experience of higher education, work in the professions and have a high level of educational credentials (Crozier *et al.*, 2011). They are then able to transmit this knowledge to their children. Also, geographical constraints concerning choice only seem to apply to working-class students (Reay, 2003b), although this is further complicated by ethnicity, for example in terms of the fear of “the possibility of racism at Oxbridge” (Reay, 1998, p.523.), although findings are not conclusive.

Institutional habitus can also have a significant impact, with those attending private or selective schools being pushed towards elite universities (Ball, 2003; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Reay, 2003b), whilst those in the FE sector are often expected to ‘think local’ (Reay, 1998, p. 524.). Students from middle-class backgrounds who attend state schools, including comprehensives, also achieve high grades and are often encouraged to gain places at elite HEIs including Oxbridge (Crozier *et al.*, 2011; James *et al.*, 2010). However intra-institutional practices also impact on potential applicants to higher education in different ways, which may be linked to “prejudices and cultural bias of ‘some’ teachers” (Reay, 1998, p.525.). In relation to comprehensive education, some schools appear to court and provide more support for middle-class students and their parents (James *et al.*, 2010). Students with the ‘right’ characteristics are pushed, others not. In terms of *familial habitus*, in middle-class families the notion of going to university is simply ‘a given’ (Crozier *et al.*, 2011). In middle class homes, familial habitus means that children ‘acquire expectations’; such expectations are *embodied*. Middle-class parents spend time developing their children’s cultural identities and this often includes the expectation that they will attend an elite HEI (Crozier *et al.*, 2011). Those parents appear better resourced in the different ‘capitals’ that they can employ to gain advantage (James *et al.*, 2010). Hence middle-class children undertake “higher education choice in a context of certainty” (Reay, 1998, p. 526.), and “middle-class familial habitus seems to generate the pursuit of advantage” (Reay, 1998, p. 526.). So the middle classes strive to maintain advantages for their children. Such familial habitus is significant, and impacts when higher education choices are made. In contrast,

working-class students do not generally possess this familial advantage and tend to choose lower status HEIs that they feel they will fit-in with culturally as part of their social class identity (Reay *et al.*, 2010; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). However other factors remain important in addition to the family, these include the school and peer groups. Reay (1998) points to the need for smaller-scale studies to further investigate some of these fields. She notes that a range of research projects have examined more structural factors such as social class and gender, but calls for a micro approach to investigation that will build on some of the differences she discovered during research concerning choice. This links to Vryonides (2007) and a call for qualitative studies to further illuminate differences.

In referring back to a range of work, Reay (2001) draws together findings from three research projects to examine the relationship between education and the working class and the way this contrasts to middle-class experiences. She notes the historical trend within the English education system for the middle classes to maintain a dominant position, and for education associated with the working-class to be linked to social control. This is evident within comprehensive schools where middle-class parents strive to maintain advantage and control through participating in school governance and activities engaging teachers and school managers (Ball, 2003; Crozier *et al.*, 2011; James *et al.*, 2010). Reay (2001) maintains that the education system retains significant prejudice in favour of the middle-class and continues to subordinate working-class students.

Within the educational system all the authority remains vested in the middle classes. Not only do they run the system, the system is one which valorizes middle— rather than working-class cultural capital. Regardless of what individual working-class males and females are able to negotiate and achieve for themselves within the educational field, the collective pattern of working-class trajectories within education remain sharply different from those of the middle classes, despite over a 100 years of universal state education (Reay, 2001, p.334.).

When working class children do succeed, this is in terms of an escape to the middle class, through adopting middle-class culture (Reay, 2001). This can also prove problematic in terms of social mobility. Working class children can attend university, but then feel like an ‘imposter’, presumably because they have not internalised such culture. According to Reay (2001), this lack of authenticity, or sense of not fitting-in, can also emerge through visits and interviews to, in particular, ‘traditional’ universities. Such universities can also be seen as too ‘elitist’ and not for the working class (Hutchings and Archer, 2001).

In a slightly different vein, but again linking back to Bourdieuan notions of choice, Ball *et al* (2002a) shift away from a straightforward structural analysis, instead examining ‘choice biographies’ (Ball *et al.*, 2002a, p.58.) as a tool for explanation, although these in-turn lead back to factors surrounding education and socio-economic status. Bloomer and Hodgkinson (2000) also examine ‘learning careers’ and the extent to which they can



change over time, as well as the significance of institutional practices and culture that link to higher education choices.

Reay *et al.* (2005) examine a wide range of factors that link to social class, race and gender that are also influenced by a correspondingly wide range of criteria such as family, friends and institutions.

In a different approach to HEI choice a range of studies, concerning the geography of higher education, have looked at geographical mobility and the way that students make decisions concerning whether they will stay at home, remain in the local area or move away (Holdsworth, 2009b; Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). Some studies have focussed on distance travelled and not the status of the HEI, additionally research has focussed on both national and international student mobility (Holton and Riley, 2013). Student decisions appear to be for a number of reasons, but in part can be linked to the socio-economic status of the student. Those from higher socio-economic groups have in general correspondingly higher geographical mobility (Christie, 2007; Holdsworth, 2009a; Holton and Riley, 2013; Murphey-Lejeune, 2002; Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005; Reay *et al.*, 2001b). Students from more affluent areas travel further, whereas those from poorer areas, derived through analysis of postcodes, travel the least distance from home (Farr, 2001). Interest in this area has become more significant as a consequence of the expansion of higher education, and correspondingly through increases in the number of students attending their local HEIs (Holdsworth, 2009b) and often the less prestigious post-1992 institutions (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005).

Popular, and dominant, middle-class media discourses about HE tend to promote a view that mobility and moving away from home and a regional locale are the norm (Christie, 2007), despite increases in local participation. Such increases also link to large numbers of students who remain local and also in the family home (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005).

The reasons for a lack of geographical mobility, often related to class, are various. Whilst economic or financial reasons can clearly be cited (Christie, 2007; Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005) other factors have a bearing such as degree of cultural capital (Christie, 2007; Jamieson, 2000; Reay, 2003a), degree of support from family and peers as well as staying close to home to retain emotional security, add confidence, increase control, reduce risk and to allow students to maintain local employment (Ball *et al.*, 2002a; Christie, 2007; Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). Family specifically also appear to be quite significant in relation to students decisions to stay local as decisions are often taken on a collaborative basis. In contrast, those who are more mobile might have a class-based family tradition of leaving home to attend HE (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005).

With specific reference to international or trans-national student movements in Europe a relatively small group of students, an elite, can be identified who have high levels of economic security and as such tend to belong to higher socio-economic groups (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002). These groups have a high degree of mobility, which is characterised by geographical and cultural flexibility. The key characteristic of these

mobile students, for Murphey-Lejeune (2002), links to their possession of *mobility capital* that in her terms is “a subcomponent of human capital, enabling individuals to enhance their skills because of the richness of the international experience gained living abroad” (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002, p. 51.). She sees this as quite a scarce resource that is the possession of a distinct elite group. *Mobility capital* is considered to be constructed through familial background and experiences, previous experiences of travel and individual personality (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002). Those students who possess *mobility capital* report significant experiences of family mobility themselves, sometimes because of ‘family migratory mobility’, but often as a consequence of professional occupational mobility in both national and international scope (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002). In relation to these students mobility had also often been experienced by children as a consequence of being sent away for educational experiences such as language schools. Most of the students in the sample had experienced travel with a residential element prior to going away to university and in general were given economic support for their mobility from their family. In contrast ‘virtual mobility’ had often been experienced from families who invited foreign guests into their homes (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002). Given these experiences it is clear that this distinct, or elite, group have in general acquired *mobility capital* through their socio-economic position. Other factors are also highlighted as significant in developing *mobility capital*. These link to sibling travel experiences and rivalry, parents who possess an international outlook, experiences of adaptation, initial experience of travel and the frequency and

duration of mobility experiences (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002). Again, these are also linked to socio-economic position.

A number of parents from lower socio-economic groups, whose children have chosen to live away from home, want their children to have a similar experience to their middle-class peers (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005), this might also build cultural and social capital and facilitate a smoother transition to HE. In terms of these working-class students who move away from their home and local community, "mobility becomes a form of embodied cultural capital... leaving home is the right thing to do" (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005, p. 516.). So leaving home creates *mobility capital* or *cultural capital* through mobility itself, "mobility can be seen as facilitating a student habitus" (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005, p. 516.). The process of mobility appears to be important in-itself for generating cultural capital and presumably facilitating a propensity to be mobile in the future. It also enables students to fit-in more effectively.

Whilst one might be concerned about different levels of geographical mobility, and see trends in terms of movement and social class, the question remains as to the relative advantage that geographical mobility might provide. As noted, moving away from home is seen as the norm in the dominant discourse concerning the *student experience* (Christie, 2007; Holdsworth, 2009b). However, this is very much a middle-class discourse and may not have responded to widening participation, demographic and generational changes in recent years (Holdsworth, 2009b). In many metropolitan areas a

wide choice of HEIs are available for students from all backgrounds and this might eliminate the need for geographical mobility. This situation has resulted in the advantages of moving away being questioned (Christie, 2007). Staying local can present advantages to non-traditional applicants who will gain family and peer support in their community. Consequently, “getting a degree... [will be]... an achievable goal” (Christie, 2007, p. 2454.). This means that staying local can provide a clear advantage and help working-class students to fit-in and make the transition to HE (Holdsworth, 2006).

However, to gain access to the broadest range of elite HEIs one could certainly argue that a national (or international) outlook is required to geographical mobility. Focussing on only a regional segment of the HE market could pose a limitation on choice particularly for students in rural areas. Staying local might also pose its own problems in terms of preventing an individual from feeling fully part of an HEI. Through maintaining close familial and peer relationships opportunities for networking and building social capital at an HEI might be diminished (Christie, 2007). Whilst working-class students might gain a significant benefit from retaining employment in a local community, this again reduces their opportunities for extra-curricular HE events and reduces social capital formation. Finally, remaining local also potentially poses the problem of being overly dependant on the local community, which might create distance from the culture of the HEI (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). This leads back to an advantage for working-class students who do move away. When working-class students do have geographical mobility they don’t seem to have the same family pressure and can

concentrate on integrating into the community and culture of the HEI (Holdsworth, 2006).

Those who do stay at home potentially have a disadvantage in terms of their relationship with other students and the university community. Remaining at home can create extra barriers for students when trying to fit-in with peers who are living away from home. Some working-class students fit-in more effectively because they do move away and “moving away from home may make it easier for students to overcome the contrast between their home communities and student life” (Holdsworth, 2006, p. 515.), whilst those at home might have a conflict. For those who move away their mobility creates cultural capital and a propensity for further mobility. In general terms these mobile students are more likely to be from middle-class backgrounds.

### **3.2 Conclusion for inter-class differences**

The range of research that has been examined points to a significant advantage for middle class students in terms of their utilisation of cultural and social capital when making HE choices. Students are influenced by a range of factors such as family, school, media and peer group (Reay, 1998), however these choices still appear to be influenced by social class. Those in higher social class positions appear better equipped to judge which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and subjects are most valuable (Reay, 1998), such advantage appears to be primarily derived through the family transmitting high levels of social and cultural capital (Thomas and Quinn, 2007). Whilst the family is

probably the most important factor, schooling can also play a part with some teachers more likely to push middle class students (Reay, 1998).

When working class students do attend university they may not feel comfortable or fit-in (Reay, 2001), and may avoid certain institutions as these appear too elitist (Hutchings and Archer, 2001). One could make a link to the embodied nature of cultural capital. Working class students may not have internalised the dispositions, norms and values that make certain choices possible.

Literature supports a distinct advantage for the middle class. They possess and utilise higher levels of social and cultural capital when making choices. However, this leaves a gap. Without disputing the overall patterns, the way that some working class students do make well-informed choices and do attend prestigious institutions is not addressed. This points to a need to specifically examine how students make HE choices and how some working class students appear to have obtained the cultural and social capital to do so and recognise possible advantage.

**How do potential applicants from similar socio-economic backgrounds, in particular working-class backgrounds, decide if, where and what to study? In what different ways do they understand and use HE?**

### **3.3 Intra-class differences**

Brooks (2004), through undertaking a longitudinal study, examines assertions made in previous research (e.g. Ball, 2003) relating to differential advice given, that whilst linking to social class, also examine variations in advice, and the relative impact, given to young people by mothers or fathers. Her longitudinal study utilised a sample of fifteen students who participated in semi-structured interviews, six each, over a duration of two years. She assesses the possible differences, linking to both cultural and social capital, and the way that mothers and fathers access this. Brooks refers to larger scale surveys (Archer *et al.*, 2003; Roberts and Allen, 1997) to demonstrate that parents are significantly involved in the choices that students make, although suggests that mothers and fathers differ in the impact they make. Whilst Brooks (2004) and others (Ball, 2003) suggest that mothers are significant in influencing choice, this support was primarily attributed to middle-class mothers. Ball (2003) sees this in terms of 'status maintenance'. This introduces the notion of intra-class difference. Brooks (2004) points to a range of research (Ball, 2003; Power, 2000; Power *et al.*, 2003) that highlights the intra-class differences within the middle-class, the extent to which these are significant



and the contested nature of this distinction. In addition to differences highlighted Brooks notes that:

Degree of autonomy at work, level of job security and opportunities for career progression have also been argued to be an effective means of differentiating between fractions of the middle class (Brooks, 2004, p.498.).

These kinds of differences are also fundamentally those employed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (Office for National Statistics, 2009) when classifying different groups within the occupational class structure, and in this case the middle class. Here the ONS, National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) system, broadly splits the middle class into employers and higher managerial groups, higher professionals, lower professionals, lower managerial and higher supervisory occupations (Office for National Statistics, 2009). Social class can also be operationalised in terms of parents' level of, and experience of, education (Brooks, 2004). This links to a difference in values associated with differential experience of education that in turn links to occupational position, and hence parental values. Whilst Brooks locates respondents within middle class categories, it is worth noting that the groups being studied seem to represent those members of the middle class who have benefitted from occupational mobility. Consequently such groups might culturally have different perspectives on the role and use of higher education.

In her sample of respondents, Brooks (2004) identifies a range of middle-class students whose parents do not have a 'traditional' middle-class experience of education, as they have not attended university, but who have 'worked their way up' in terms of employment. Such a sample is in contrast to previous research (e.g. David *et al.*, 2003; Pugsley, 1998) investigating more traditional/professional middle-class groups. Brooks (2004) identifies distinctive types of parental involvement in higher education choices, that range from high to low level, however this is not linked to degree of influence. Brooks also notes differences in these 'non-traditional' middle-class families, identifying a low level of parental involvement from mothers. In contrast Brooks notes that fathers have greater involvement: because mothers are rejected as 'maternal' and for their localism (Brooks, 2004). Consequently,

As a result of the young people's conscious and active rejection of their mother's involvement in this way, their fathers came to assume the role of primary 'helper' and confidant – largely by default (Brooks, 2004, p.505.).

In terms of the way that parents can influence or aid choice, Brooks reiterates suggestions by Ball (2003) who "emphasizes the importance of parents' social networks and their own educational experiences" (Brooks, 2004, p.506.) and notes the lack of these attributes in participants in her own study. In contrast parents had learnt about higher education from their children's teachers and through influences in the workplace. This could begin to explain the higher level of parental involvement from fathers in

Brooks (2004) study, as fathers tended to have a better knowledge of higher education derived from their position in the labour market. This is further considered below.

Intra-class distinctions are also specifically noted by Power (2000) who examined the relationship between educational background and the specific occupations of the middle classes. Power points to theoretical notions concerning the overall position of the middle class, but also to distinctions within the middle class. These intra-class differences range from occupational distinctions, types of production or private or public sector employment (Power, 2000). Through undertaking longitudinal research focusing on 199 'high achieving' respondents from a range of school types, Power examines pathways into the middle classes. Power refines her classification of the middle classes into three distinctive groups: "the petite bourgeoisie... managers... and professionals" (Power, 2000, p.136.), claiming that the division between the latter two is significant. Additionally, the professional grouping could divide, as suggested above, into private and public sector employment. Subsequently Power assesses pathways into these groups. Power notes that parents' "socio-economic status and educational background" (Power, 2000, p.137.) influence their children's achievements. Consequently a majority of offspring followed their parents' broad middle-class occupational groupings. School factors also seem to be fairly insignificant in terms of sector, however it is noted that gender patterns are less straightforward – with women from independent schools being more likely to enter the professions (Power, 2000), as did state educated males and females. In terms of the state educated students the public sector could represent a safer route. Power also notes little difference between the different occupational groupings in

gaining A-Levels or degrees, but differences do link to the status of the HEI (Power, 2000) with those in the professions being more likely to attend an 'elite' institution. Power does identify a school factor that is significant in relation to 'level' of occupation rather than 'type' of occupation, with those from private schools undertaking managerial roles. Higher educational establishment attended is more significant than schooling in terms of resultant employment sector, and as a further layer of importance Power emphasises, "the increasing significance of not just going to university, but of going to the 'right' kind of university" (Power, 2000, p.139.). Power further suggests a fracture in the middle class: in relation to sector of employment in terms of 'private or public', and highlights corresponding values in terms of economic and ideological. This in turn links to school sector with more of those who attended private schools being in the private sector. This is, according to Power, "the most significant boundary within the middle class" (Power, 2000, p.142.).

Brooks further (2003b) suggests that a 'straightforward' structural explanation that links to social class differences and the uses of non-economic capital obscures the way that students from similar social class positions understand higher education. Consequently she again challenges notions of middle class homogeneity in terms of choices made and links this in part to support given by parents. Utilising a relatively small sample employing a longitudinal methodology and based on in-depth interviews (Brooks, 2003b), Brooks found that middle class students from similar backgrounds had significant differences in knowledge of higher education. They did not all recognize hierarchical differences between institutions, or give such differences importance.

Through analysis of responses Brooks identifies four approaches to “institutional status and reputation” (Brooks, 2003b, p.285.). These range from students who are clearly aware of hierarchical distinctions and who favour ‘elite’ or ‘old’ universities; students aware of some status differences but lacking confidence and exhibiting confusion over some distinctions; those linking hierarchical ranking to ‘vocational’ employment opportunities; and finally those with only knowledge of subject based hierarchies (Brooks, 2003b). Brooks indicates that students’ parents play a significant role in shaping attitudes to higher education. In general she notes that students shared the perspectives of their parents, and that in this study parents had similar socio-economic backgrounds and, in general, had not participated in higher education. However the extent to which families influenced choosing a HEI varied considerably and a number of factors are identified to explain such difference. Brooks identifies parents’ employment context as significant, in terms of the extent to which they come into contact with those from varying levels of education and educational prestige. She also identifies the extent to which teachers, over time, had influenced both parents and students in relation to higher education.

Parents influenced their children’s understanding of the HE market not necessarily on the basis of their achieved class position or their own HE experience, but on the basis of finer-grained differences such as the extent to which they had contact with graduates within the workplace (Brooks, 2003b, p.290.).

Consequently middle-class trajectories into education can be significantly different, as many lower middle class students may have more in common with the working class than with their middle-class peers (Brooks, 2003b). Whilst parental influence is significant, the role of peers is also noted in terms of academic standing within the school and the, “process of ranking and comparing between friends appeared to distort these [familial] messages” (Brooks, 2003b,p.290.). Students judge themselves relative to their peers’ perceived academic achievements, although these did not always correspond to grades obtained. Consequently,

Friends played an important role in constructing an individual’s sense of ‘ability’ and position relative to peers...[these]...had a considerable impact on decisions made about higher education (Brooks, 2003b, p.292.).

Brooks proposes that the ‘constant comparisons’ that students make influence notions of academic ability, these in-turn influence which subjects and higher education institutions they consider applying to, as this ranking corresponds to their own ranking. However, although peer influence may have an effect, it is not a straightforward relationship – as Brooks considers in the following paragraph.

More specifically she (Brooks, 2003a) examines ‘friendship’, identifying it as problematic in relation to the construction of higher education choices. Peer influence has been cited in previous research as potentially significant: and Brooks points to Reay *et al* (2001a) who suggest that:

higher education applicants are located within a matrix of influences which are best represented by overlapping circles of individual, family, friends and institution (Reay *et al.*, 2001a, para. 1.6.).

Within this range of influences, peer influence has been ‘under-theorized’ (Brooks, 2003a). Some studies do consider friendships (e.g. Ball *et al.*, 2002b; Reay, 1998) and “Roberts and Allen (1997) report that over 70% of their sample had discussed their choice of both course and institution with their friends” (Brooks, 2003a, p.283.). However these do not indicate the significance of this contact, although Reay notes a gender difference, with ‘younger female students’ more likely to discuss higher education than male students (Reay, 1998, p.527.). In terms of Brooks’ (2003a) findings most respondents had not discussed choices with friends in any detail. When choices were discussed they tended to be after the university application had been made, in contrast to Reay’s (1998) findings where female respondents reported frequently discussing choices with friends. Brooks suggests that the lack of discussion with peers arises for a range of reasons, including perception that choices are not collective (Brooks, 2003a). However the reasons may lie more in the way that students view the nature of friendship and the extent to which education is seen as a ‘consumer product’. However Brooks points more to a notion “of higher education choice emphasis[ing]...differences between friends” (Brooks, 2003a, p.243.). Such differences, in turn, relate to hierarchical difference and as such threaten friendships. So a situation of equality in friendship may be threatened by drawing attention to inequalities and

hierarchies in the education system and the relative positions that young people slot into as a result of differential attainment. Brooks notes:

Through the construction of hierarchies (of institutions, degree subjects and levels of academic attainment), friends and peers exerted an important influence on young people's decisions. However... such influences served, simultaneously, to restrict conversations about higher education (Brooks, 2003a, p.246.).

In relation to intra-class differences within the working class, less research has been undertaken. Hutchings and Archer (2001) acknowledge that, like the middle class, the working class are not a homogenous group, and have a variety of different backgrounds. Hence their correspondingly varied identities and circumstances mean that factors that influence higher education participation vary significantly. They suggest that different sections of the working class have different levels of participation in higher education and suggest that such participation can be influenced by factors such as geography, ethnicity and gender. However they primarily highlight inter-class differences with the middle class.

### **3.4 Conclusion for intra-class differences**

When examining intra-class differences a range of work has explored the way that different groups within the middle class do make differential choices. Some explanations for difference link to the relative influence of mothers and fathers (Archer *et al.*, 2003;



Brooks, 2004), and the extent to which they possess cultural and social capital from their relative social class position. This points to a lack of homogeneity in the middle class in terms of occupational grouping that further links to differing levels and utilisation of cultural and social capital (Brooks, 2004). This can also be differentiated on the basis of public or private sector employment (Power, 2000), which also might relate to parents' own level of education.

Such occupational groupings and different utilisation of capital result in intra-class differences within the middle class that see the offspring of parents in professional backgrounds more likely to attend elite institutions (Power, 2000). Further, a significant difference that links to choice relates to the 'private and state' divide within middle class education (Power, 2000). Some differences within the middle class seem to be less directly related to intra-class socio-economic or occupational level, but instead link to employment context, the role of teachers and peer influence (Brooks, 2003a).

Whilst a range of factors appear to both fragment and differentially influence groups within the middle class, literature does not comprehensively address similar issues amongst working class students. It is acknowledged that the working class are also a fragmented group (Hutchings and Archer, 2001), and some explanation is offered for differential approaches to HE choice, such as region, gender and ethnicity (Hutchings and Archer, 2001). However, these are not comprehensively developed and leave a clear gap in the literature. Consequently intra-class differences within the working class require further investigation and theoretical development.

## **4. Conceptual Framework**

**To what extent do potential applicants have access to and employ social and cultural capital in making decisions about Higher Education (HE)?**

**Is this related to social class?**

### **4.1 Operationalising social class**

In approaching this question, it is necessary to briefly consider and define the nature of *social class* prior to a more detailed examination of social and cultural capital. Social class can be examined within the context of some notable theoretical traditions: including Marxist approaches that look at an economic basis for class, and Weberian approaches that, whilst acknowledging economic factors, also introduce notions of status and power (Ritzer, 1996b). In more contemporary philosophical and sociological debate postmodern approaches have suggested that social class is no longer relevant (Ritzer, 1996b). Whilst this is an interesting debate, I would suggest that in the context of educational inequalities outlined below, a working concept of class is required for this investigation.

In terms of educational research many practitioners adopt a broadly Weberian approach to social class in terms of an occupational definition that encompasses a range of criteria linked to employment. Weberian conceptions of social class do not wholly give primacy

to economic factors, such as ownership of the means of production or remuneration, but also consider issues of status or standing that an occupation confers as well as the degree to which political power or influence is linked to a particular role (Ritzer, 1996b). Approaches outlined in this thesis link to two occupational schemes utilised by the government. The first, the older Registrar General Classification (Iannelli, 2007), divided the population into six occupational groups – although these also broadly corresponded to middle class (non-manual) and working class (manual) occupations. The second approach, the current government scheme, The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) system (Office for National Statistics, 2009), also utilises an occupational class-based system, but broadens the occupational groups to reflect changes to the labour market. However it still distinguishes a clear hierarchy ranging from employers and higher managerial occupations in group one, to those who have never worked in group eight (Office for National Statistics, 2009). Finally, some analysis has also been undertaken in a similar way by utilising Goldthorpe's (1980) earlier social class typology that again, following a Weberian approach, classifies individuals in terms of seven grades of occupation ranging from professionals to the unskilled (Egerton and Halsey, 1993).

Whilst the different occupational schemes have clear variations, as they have tried to reflect the changing nature of the labour market, they nevertheless point to clear hierarchies in terms of employment. This does present its own problems however, as making comparisons across time is made more difficult. Comparisons are also problematic as no consensus emerges linking particular classifications to the middle or

working class. In research that utilises the Registrar General Classification some studies define the middle class in terms of classes one and two, who constitute the professional and managerial groupings (Power, 2000), whilst other studies also add class three non-manual (Connor, 2001). I would suggest that regardless of scheme, it is the relative benefit of those at the top and the relative disadvantage of those at the bottom that is central to this research.

In Bourdieuan terms social class, whilst a central concept, is often ‘implicit’ and Bourdieu does not engage in his own classification system (Crossley, 2011). Whilst Bourdieuan approaches are often broadly linked to a critical or Marxist perspective, Bourdieu moves to a position that, I would argue, is closer to Weber, where he considers that a range of factors contribute to a ‘social class’ position also suggesting that social class is relational. These factors link to the access, acquisition and utilisation of different types of capital (Crossley, 2011), and better reflect the nuances of a highly differentiated labour market. Some of these differences are discussed below.

## **4.2 Theoretical underpinning**

Bourdieu formulates a broad and ambitious theoretical approach to explain and explore some significant cultural aspects of social inequality. In examining Bourdieu’s formulation of *cultural capital* a range of theoretical concerns require consideration. These concerns link to the different advantages gained through the acquisition, development and utilisation of cultural capital and their direct relationship to social class.

Bourdieu suggests that those in higher social class positions wish to define themselves as such through distinctive cultural norms that distinguish them from lower social class groups – he terms this *distinction* (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 22.). Not only do specific cultural traits provide such distinction, but they also facilitate the exclusion of those lacking such culture and maintain privilege and social inequality (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). However, this is not solely rooted in an economic relationship of advantage, but Bourdieu points to a more conscious process where individuals through their agency gain advantage. This links to the quite specific notion of cultural capital, which refers to the mechanisms by which individuals are socialised into accepting specific class-based norms, values and tastes which will later enable social reward and increase power. Cultural capital encompasses a range of characteristics “including such things as verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials” (Swartz, 1997, p. 75.). However cultural capital is not necessarily consciously transmitted, but nevertheless results in children developing specific and habitual behaviours.

Bourdieu revises his concept of cultural capital throughout his career and his concerns shift from examining educational knowledge, linguistic skills and style, to later concerns with academic credentials and “attitudes, preferences and behaviour that are conceptualized as ‘tastes’ used for social selection” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 5.). Bourdieu additionally highlights three different types of cultural capital, as Winkle-Wagner summarises:

Embodied (one's sense of culture, traditions, norms), objectified (things that one owns), and institutionalized (recognition of particular tastes, norms, or values within institutions such as schools) (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 6.).

Embodied cultural capital refers to the way that individuals, through the process of socialisation, internalise cultural goods. As such, the family “sensitize the child to cultural distinctions” (Swartz, 1997, p. 76.). The child can then utilise such cultural resources during schooling. Objectified cultural capital could include educational resources such as books. Institutionalised cultural capital links to both values within education and the qualifications obtained from education. This is not simply a case of passing on economic capital, but involves familial and educational socialisation in terms of cultural resources. In this way social class background can be transmitted from one generation to another. As Winkle-Wagner notes:

The cumulative acquisition of cultural capital is implicit: one who acquires high-status cultural capital through family origin and through education will be more privileged in society generally (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 6.).

Education compounds this situation as educators, consciously or not, reward high status cultural capital, which can be inferred from the clear correlation between higher socio-economic groups and higher educational qualifications and higher status better paid employment (Ball *et al.*, 2002a; Metcalf, 1997). The corresponding credentials that are

accrued can then be utilised to gain high status and rewarding employment. This gives the illusion of meritocracy in terms of outcomes. So that whilst all may undertake education and apply for university, the majority of those succeeding in obtaining places at the most prestigious Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) tend to be from higher social class groups (Office for Fair Access, 2010) [Also see Policy Background, pp 32-33.].

To further explain the situation of dominance Bourdieu introduces the concepts of *field* and *habitus*. A *field* is an arena where cultural knowledge of specific “tastes, dispositions, or norm, is both produced and given a price” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 7.). It could also be described as a “type of competitive marketplace in which various kinds of capital... are employed and deployed” (Ritzer, 1996a, p. 406.). For example, both family and education, or the school, are examples of a *field*. Within a specific field, and multiple fields exist, cultural capital has a particular value. Consequently within a given context, or field, such as a college: “a field is simultaneously a space of conflict and competition...in which participants vie to establish monopoly over the...effective capital within it” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 17.). The value given to any cultural capital is dependent on the particular field in question. What is high value in one field may not be appropriate to another, “Bourdieu underscores the fact that cultural capital is a *social relationship*” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 8.). One could see higher education choice as operating within a specific field, with only certain cultural competencies being rewarded. Whilst all individuals possess cultural resources, only some have the cultural capital that is valued in a given field. Whilst some college students have cultural

knowledge, skills and norms that are valued when applying to HE, others do not. So the situation within a field is dynamic, “cultural fields...are made up not simply of institutions and rules, but of interactions between institutions, rules and practices” (Webb *et al.*, 2002, p. 22.). Those who enjoy positions of power are able “to designate what is ‘authentic’ capital” (Webb *et al.*, 2002, p. 23.). So, one could suggest that, those in powerful positions both play the game and make the rules. Nevertheless the rules remain fluid to a degree, and Swartz argues that this is what distinguishes Bourdieu from more rigid structural explanations such as Althusser (Swartz, 1997).

Bourdieu also employs the concept of *habitus* to describe the way that individuals internalise specific dispositions, rules and values through their primary socialisation. Swartz terms this a “deep structuring cultural matrix” (Swartz, 1997, p. 104.), whilst Vandenberghe terms the process as “deposited [or] incorporated within individuals” (Vandenberghe, 2002, p. 8.). What does seem significant is the way that such deep-rooted notions of value operate, at least partly at a subconscious level. They also seem to create a habitus that is reluctant to change and to some degree might constrain agency. Habitus also represents the internalisation of a specific social class position. Consequently, “one’s seemingly benign dispositions are actually integral to the reinforcement and creation of the social stratification and one’s location within it” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 9.). So social class position, dispositions and corresponding disadvantage, “can be transmitted intergenerationally through socialization and produce forms of self-defeating behaviour” (Swartz, 1997, p. 104.). As Bourdieu suggests, “habitus ...is embodied” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 437.). Habitus links to the degree of



cultural capital one 'recognises', even if subconsciously, in a given social situation. In an educational setting a teacher might favour a student who behaves in a particular way (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Such an action could be, " an unconscious reward for the student's habitus, demonstrated through his or her cultural capital" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 11.). However, concurrently, the student is also possibly subconsciously calculating their actions on the basis of, "what is possible, impossible, and probable for individuals in their specific locations in a stratified social order" (Swartz, 1997, p. 106.). So whilst *habitus* may have a strong influence, like *field* it leaves some room for agency and as such is relational, "Habitus merely 'suggests' what people should think and what they should choose to do" (Ritzer, 1996a, p. 405.).

One specific and fundamental area of habitus is *taste* where individuals demonstrate preferences. Bourdieu is suggesting that far from this being an individual process, taste is a behaviour or disposition acquired through primarily familial socialisation. *Taste* splits into three distinctive groups for Bourdieu that roughly correspond to social class and level of education. He terms these 'legitimate taste' associated with the upper class, 'middle-brow taste' for the middle class and 'popular taste' for the working class (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 16.). It is evident that the higher the social class, the less accessible the taste to lower social class groups. Taste it would seem is not neutral but is an expression of class position: "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 6.). Through expressing particular tastes an individual is seen as belonging to a specific social class and simultaneously belongs to that social class through expressing that taste (Bourdieu, 1998; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). These tastes are primarily the

product of socialisation and are therefore broadly linked to one's social class origins. Taste is not individual or arbitrary, but is the product of social class relations. Through exhibiting the correct tastes one makes a *social distinction*.

In education settings taste can act as a form of social currency but also as a bridge to new knowledge. If a student already knows and values particular referents in a discussion of literature or art, for example, one can benefit more from a lecture or discussion than someone who does not already have these referents. It is one of the ways that taste translates into currency, not only in the social realm but also in the 'meritocratic' realm of schooling or college campuses (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 12.).

Taste allows individuals to 'get a head start'. This could clearly apply to HE choice. Those from higher social class groups, as a result of their socialisation, might develop and appreciation of, and choose, more academic or 'legitimate' subjects that have higher academic standing or value than those with more 'obvious' vocational relevance. Taste might also be advantageous when writing Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) personal statements or attending interviews.

In tandem with cultural capital, social capital is also explored by Bourdieu as "a capital of social connections, honourability and respectability" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 122.). Social capital is employed, or functions, through networks. Social capital "implies a sense of obligation between people" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 13.), but in a similar way to

cultural capital such social connections are also beneficial, or not, depending on the specific field. Social capital refers to the connections and networks that individuals can access. This also links to the acquisition and utilisation of cultural capital through social connections.

One's social network becomes a type of 'credential' in social settings. Habitus (a set of dispositions) and cultural capital (culturally relevant tastes, preferences, skills and abilities) are rewarded and sanctioned in social settings. Social capital (networks, social obligations, and connections) may help to locate places (or interactions) in a given field where cultural capital and habitus will be rewarded (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 13.).

In the application of Bourdieu's analysis, Horvat (2001) points to the use of symbolic power in relation to elite college applications. This does not correspond to a traditional Marxist approach to power as economic, but works on a more ideological level through emphasising – and making self-evident – the distinctions between classes.

Dominant symbolic systems provide integration for dominant groups, distinctions and hierarchies for ranking groups, and legitimation of social ranking by encouraging the dominated to accept their existing hierarchies of social distinction (Swartz, 1997, p. 83.).

Consequently, he argues, those in lower social groups accept their position in society. To take this further one can also see this in terms of *symbolic violence*, through the utilisation of *symbolic power*.

Symbolic violence... is the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate. This legitimacy obscures the power relations which permit that imposition to be successful (Jenkins, 2002, p. 104.).

Such legitimacy, which obscures symbolic violence, includes being “treated as inferior, denied resources, limited in ... social mobility and aspirations” (Webb *et al.*, 2002, p. 25.). This is achieved through presenting such differential treatment and achievement as “the natural order of things” (Webb *et al.*, 2002, p. 25.).

In broad terms, education reinforces social inequality through the conversion of “social hierarchies into academic hierarchies...to perpetuate the ‘social order’” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 17.). Whilst a range of students can acquire cultural capital in education, those who have a head start through familial influence – of cultural tastes valued by higher social class groups – will gain more reward. So choosing to send your child to prestigious institutions, such as Eton or Harrow, will both have the effect of recognising cultural capital acquired through familial influence as well as adding additional cultural capital from the institution. Whilst it might appear that students have ‘gifts’ or skills, in reality they are rewarded for the tasks that are derived from their

social class origin, “school today succeeds, with the ideology of natural ‘gifts’ and innate ‘tastes’, in legitimating the circular reproduction of social hierarchies and educational hierarchies” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1998, p. 208.). Consequently education achieves social reproduction, not social equality. Those who have gained familial cultural capital through their social origin are best suited to success in education as it reflects and rewards the values of those in such positions. Consequently, I propose that a Bourdieusian position that wishes to balance the influence of both structure and agency fails in this task. Whilst purely structural accounts for inequality might be overly deterministic, I would suggest that they still have primacy over agency. Bourdieu attempts to give agency more prominence through the development of non-economic capital. However, these non-economic categories continue to reflect a social class imbalance.

Social class is certainly correlated to educational achievement and a range of statistical studies demonstrate this relationship (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Evans, 2006). I would argue that such a relationship is also correspondingly linked to cultural and social capital, which is discussed below, as well as material educational disadvantage.

### **4.3 Contemporary approaches to social and cultural capital**

Following Bourdieu, in addressing the question of the utilisation and access to social and cultural capital, a range of literature emerges. Social capital can be structural in that opportunities and networks within a community can be significant (Putnam, 1995).

social capital refers to...social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination, and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 1995, p.67.)

As such, they can be encouraged through community collaboration and Putnam suggests social capital is being eroded through a decline in civic engagement and participation – and in turn educational activities decline. Whilst it might be desirable to increase social capital for all sections of the community, this approach gives the impression that different social class groups do not have their own restrictive vested interests. High social capital is also linked to high academic achievement (Schuller and Field, 2002). Therefore, obtaining social capital could be crucial as a means of reducing or removing social exclusion (Mayo, 2002). Social capital can also be centred on resources within the family and this can affect both educational achievement and employment (Bourdieu, 1998; Coleman, 1988). However this can also be related to human capital (Coleman, 1988) that is productive for employers. In addition, Lin (1988) demonstrates a link between social capital and occupational mobility. Coleman (1988) further links social capital to community trust and obligation.

Social capital, it seems, has the capacity to empower individuals through civic engagement (Putnam, 1995) or resources within the family (Bourdieu, 1998; Coleman, 1988) although it can empower people in an unequal way. This remains one of the key questions in assessing the benefits of social capital as a means to empowerment and the reduction of social exclusion. Studies concerning the use of social capital by adult

students (Jackson, 2006; Preston, 2003) highlight the extent to which social capital can be both beneficial in terms of facilitating opportunities, or exclusionary through creating a culture beneficial to some and a barrier to others who lack such capital. Both studies identified social class as a significant criterion and identified different patterns of the development of social capital in relation to this. They demonstrated links to both empowerment and unfair advantage and found it problematic to separate social capital from cultural capital. Social capital can be beneficial and may encourage particular outcomes in terms of university choice, although such support might be variable and can be exclusionary.

Through revealing the interconnections between different kinds of capital and the way that parents use non-economic capital, qualitative methodologies give a rich insight into the dynamics of social and cultural capital that might not be revealed through quantitative methodology. Quantitative research can however give a good overview of the extent to which social class links to social advantage and can begin to explore the reasons why. Working-class students have been shown to lack the confidence of those in higher social class groups, feel they are not provided with adequate HE advice and are unhappier with choices they make (Connor *et al.*, 2001). In addition, quantitative research points to the differences in participation rates between social classes in overall terms (Thomas and Quinn, 2007), can statistically assess this data and establish trends effectively; for example in terms of subject choice where working-class students are more likely to choose vocational subjects (Iannelli, 2007). Quantitative studies also point to higher levels of economic and cultural capital for higher social class groups (Thomas

and Quinn, 2007). Nevertheless, utilising qualitative research can provide a distinct advantage. Where Vryonides (2007) found little to link cultural capital to educational advantage through his own use of quantitative methods, further examination using interviews provided more depth and detail that revealed a link to social advantage in terms of social class position and the use of cultural and social capital.

This relates to my aims, where I wish to examine the students' perspectives in relation to university choice. Middle class families utilise different kinds of capital in a complex way to gain an educational advantage for their children. It is difficult to differentiate between the ways that they use different kinds of capital, social and cultural, and hence examining both together seems to make operational sense. Qualitative methods seem particularly suitable for examining a range of complex factors and give 'insight' into familial choices, outcomes and educational practices (Ball, 2003; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995).

In assessing 'cultural capital', I wish to examine the information and knowledge that circulates within and around families which might enable students to gain advantage in education and positively influence university choice. This follows Bourdieu's (1998) formulation of cultural capital, but broadens the concept through including:

students, their cultural practices, skills, attitudes, knowledge in relation to their schooling experience or outcomes... [and] parents education, cultural practices and skills and ability to engage successfully in processes and institutions influencing children's education (Vryonides, 2007, p.869.).



Through utilising cultural capital, one can see a connection to social advantage, and this relates to the 'cultural resources' that students bring to making choices (Collier and Morgan, 2008). The development of cultural capital can be linked to the family where correlations to social class have been established (Dumais, 2002). Cultural capital is passed from one generation to another and through this intergenerational process individuals gain social advantage (Swartz, 1997). Wildhagen (2009) suggests cultural capital is also "institutionalized and... is used to maintain group advantage" (Wildhagen, 2009, p.175.). This echoes Bourdieu and, in developing this, it is proposed that cultural capital is further employed to gain academic reward. Such reward has been linked to improved academic performance in a range of research (Dimaggio, 1982; Dumais, 2002) but also impacts on "whether students make certain educational transitions" (Wildhagen, 2009, p. 175.), such as improving in lessons and the transition to university.

#### **4.4 Conclusion for conceptual framework**

Social class is central to this thesis and a range of definitions have been discussed. Comparisons between different systems and occupational classifications can be complex, however a clear hierarchy in terms of employment and life chances exist and the persistence of relative benefit and relative disadvantage in education are central to this research. The possession of cultural capital, that encompasses distinctive cultural norms, has a direct relationship to a high social class position (Bourdieu, 1998), and serves as a mechanism to exclude lower social class groups and maintain advantage. Such advantage is maintained through embodied, objectified and institutional cultural

capital (Bourdieu, 1998) which, when applied to education, broadly correspond to cultural resources gained through socialisation, educational resources such as books and institutional advantage and qualifications. Social class background can be transmitted through such mechanisms to pass advantage on an intergenerational basis (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). This advantage is further compounded through education and can be applied to the field of HE choice. Some students receive the cultural knowledge, make informed choices and demonstrate the skills valued when applying to HE, others do not.

Cultural norms and dispositions are embodied through socialisation (Swartz, 1997) and are not 'simply' derived from education. As such, social class norms and position may be internalised (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). These positions are then often reinforced through education and can reduce individual agency.

Social capital relates to the connections and networks that individuals and communities establish that can be beneficial or detrimental, in this case to HE choice. Again, those in higher social class groups appear to have higher levels of social capital and gain a direct advantage through their connections. Whilst education can provide cultural and social capital, those who gain this at an early age through their families obtain an advantage. Those gaining such advantage tend to belong to higher social class groups.

Writing subsequently to Bourdieu different theorists have interpreted and utilised cultural and social capital in different ways; linking to the community, family, occupation and education, and debating the extent to which possession of cultural capital

and social capital can be beneficial (Coleman, 1988; Mayo, 2002; Putnam, 1995; Schuller and Field, 2002). Despite differences a consensus appears that points to a distinct advantage for those from higher social class positions.

A Bourdieuan conceptual framework provided an outline of the way that individuals and groups utilise both cultural and social capital in different circumstances to gain advantage. Those who are best equipped to gain such advantage tend to be those in higher social class groups. Those within the working class appear to be at a distinct disadvantage and hence have fewer cultural and social resources at their disposal. However, some working class students do appear to have higher levels of cultural and social capital than others and appear to make more informed HE choices. The way that such students establish higher levels of cultural and social capital is not addressed by Bourdieu and others and consequently becomes a focus of this thesis.

## **4.5 Justification and revision of research questions**

The literature discussed in chapters two, three and four highlight the importance of social and cultural capital and the extent to which this is linked to higher educational choice and potentially occupational mobility. It shows the extent to which possession of, and access to, non-economic capital are linked to socio-economic position. It demonstrates that those from higher socio-economic groups have broader access to social and cultural capital, which they utilise to gain significant educational advantage including the transition to university.

The expansion of higher education has not corresponded to the democratisation of education, and despite a range of changes to educational policy and practice, a situation of inequality persists (Ball *et al.*, 2002a; Egerton and Halsey, 1993; Keep and Mayhew, 2004; Office for Fair Access, 2010; The Sutton Trust, 2000; The Sutton Trust, 2011). Students from different socio-economic groups do have differential access to non-economic capital and correspondingly do make different higher education choices (Ball *et al.*, 2002a; Jackson, 2006; Reay, 1998; Wildhagen, 2009). Most studies underlining inter-class differences in higher education choice have focused on outcome and not on the processes in relation to choice of higher education (Egerton and Halsey, 1993; Iannelli, 2007; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). Most studies have been large scale and quantitative rather than qualitative and small scale (Connor *et al.*, 2001; Egerton and Halsey, 1993; Gayle *et al.*, 2002). Qualitative studies have often been London-based (Ball *et al.*, 2002b; Reay, 1998; Reay, 2002; Reay *et al.*, 2005). More small scale qualitative studies that are not London based are needed in respect of inter-class differences in higher education choice, particularly among sixth form students.

In relation to higher education choice, the majority of researchers have highlighted inter-class differences. Those who have examined intra-class differences have focused on middle class students (Ball, 2003; Brooks, 2004; Power, 2000; Power *et al.*, 2003). While middle-class homogeneity was questioned and differences identified (Bottero, 2004; Brooks, 2003b; Power, 2000) intra-class differences in relation to working-class students have been under researched and under theorised. A limited amount of research (Hutchings and Archer, 2001) acknowledges that the working class may also be

fragmented and suggests differential experiences of education. However, this has not been sufficiently examined and it is an area that needs further investigation. Hence a question on whether students from similar socio-economic backgrounds, in particular working class backgrounds, employ social and cultural capital when making higher education choices is justified. This question does not diminish the significance of inter-class difference, but does add more complexity to understanding how working-class students' access non-economic capital. Various factors have been found to play a key role in higher education choice such as family (Bourdieu, 1998; Coleman, 1988; Power, 2000; Thomas and Quinn, 2007), community (Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1995; Reay, 1998), social networks (Hutchings and Archer, 2001), school (Power, 2000; Reay, 1998) peer group (Brooks, 2004; Reay, 1998; Roberts and Allen, 1997), media (Reay, 1998), employment (Power, 2000; Reay, 1998) and geographical constraints (Reay, 1998). However, most research has been concerned with characteristics or criteria linked to students, but not the decision making process that lead to choice. Hence a second focus of investigation was the extent to which specific factors such as the role of the family, peers, community, social networks, employment, geography, and media influence higher education choice for working class students.

The revised research questions are outlined in the methodology section which is the focus of the next chapter.

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1 Research questions**

#### **Revised research questions**

1. In what ways do students from similar socio-economic backgrounds, in particular working-class backgrounds, employ social and cultural capital when making Higher Education (HE) Choices?
2. What is the role of family, peers, community, social networks, geography, and media in influencing their choices?

### **5.2 Introduction**

My approach to research corresponds to a broadly interpretative, though critical, paradigm that seeks to examine the outlook of the students being investigated in order to gain a broader understanding of their motivations and the meanings and reality of their behaviour.

I have chosen a qualitative research perspective that utilises a broadly grounded theory approach to research. Research methods employed are focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The following discussion provides a rationale and justification for the choices made and will evaluate the methodological issues that arise as a consequence of such choices.

I also assess the procedures for data collection and analysis that correspond broadly to a grounded theory approach. Finally ethical concerns are examined. My approach is supported through analysis utilising a conceptual framework derived from Bourdieu.

In attempting to discover respondents' motivations and meanings, I acknowledge the importance of a flexible approach to research. Hence the process was symbiotic and evolved in order to add to the fittingness of the research. I note that epistemological considerations are significant, but also acknowledge the significance of undertaking research that will directly address research questions posed and produce the detailed responses required to generate new theoretical understanding.

In attempting to answer the research questions, I acknowledge that the means to acquiring social and cultural capital, the way this is employed in differing ways and the extent to which this is differentially supported in an institutional framework are subject to different experiences and interpretations, and hence is individual and subjective. It is not my intention to impose pre-determined categories on respondents and create limitations in terms of possible responses. Instead my aim is to understand the individual motivations, drivers and barriers that influence choice, hence I do not wish to discourage the rich detail that can emerge from such investigations, but welcome such detail as a means to modify my own understanding formulated through reviewing literature. Consequently, a qualitative methodology that stems from an interpretative paradigm was employed.

## **5.3 Research methods**

### **5.3.1 Research paradigms**

#### **Ontological assumptions**

Empirical educational research is subject to the same influences and ontological perspectives that give context to different approaches within the social sciences. When commencing research it is important to assess the theoretical orientation being adopted which can be termed a research paradigm. Research paradigms in education can be defined as a conceptual tool that “presents a world-view that defines for its holder the nature of the ‘world’, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships in that world” (Burgess *et al.*, 2006, p54.). Burgess *et al* (2006) note the contested nature of paradigms in research and the continuing dialogue in relation to this. Research paradigms arguably have a different dynamic within the natural sciences with scientists working, at different times, within dominant paradigms that provide an accepted world view (Kuhn, 1962). In the social sciences, and hence education, paradigms seem to have less stability. Whilst dominant paradigms emerge and shift as a reflection of prevalent values, they are nevertheless regularly contested and it has been suggested that social science is “pre-paradigmatic”(Morison, 1986, p 22.), because of a lack of consensus. Paradigms can serve different purposes because they differ in type. Cohen *et al* identify three types: ‘empirical theories’, ‘grand theories’ and ‘critical theory’ (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p 12.). However, in any event, a range of competing paradigms emerge and need considering as a context to primary research.



### **Epistemological assumptions**

In terms of research paradigms a significant axis emerges, in epistemological terms, between positivism and interpretivism. These tend to be portrayed as oppositional in terms of outlook and are certainly identified as the most significant approaches (Burgess *et al.*, 2006; Cohen *et al.*, 2008; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In some commentaries a broader range of approaches are identified; such as post-positivism, critical, constructivist (feminist) and postmodern approaches (Burgess *et al.*, 2006, pp 54-55.). However, I would suggest that these can be subsumed into the broad positivist-interpretivist axis. In more contemporary discussion it is suggested that one can adopt a range of approaches and remain systematic and effective, indicating that it is not necessary to restrict oneself to one world view over another (Gorard, 2002).

In positivist approaches the world can be understood in a 'straightforward' way, providing it is compartmentalised and studied in an appropriate way: through quantitative measurement and the establishment of precise rules (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). This interpretation appears to equate positivist approaches with quantitative research, which is a misconception. Alternatively the interpretive paradigm acknowledges the complexity of reality and demands a research approach that can manage such complexity (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) and offer a 'heterarchical', or three dimensional explanation for behaviour. In highlighting these differences Maykut and Morehouse suggest the two approaches seek different kinds of data: "words versus numbers" (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 16.). However it would seem to be the case that it is not the difference between 'words' or 'numbers' that are significant, but the

way that the data derived from such approaches are given meaning through interpretation and analysis.

However, the research process is not ‘simply’ concerned with the technical application of research methods – but the extent to which research is informed and embodied by “ontological... and... epistemological assumptions... that give rise to methodological considerations” (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p. 5.). It is these assumptions about the nature of research that need consideration in relation to this research project. In broad terms I have adopted an interpretivist research paradigm. In doing so I acknowledge that it is not necessary to ‘take sides’, as one can integrate aspects of different approaches. However, I broadly accept some of the tenets of the interpretivist approach that suggest that undertaking research is linked to ‘intersubjectivity’:

The key element of the interpretivism is that it is defined or constituted in terms of human beings attributing meaning to, or interpreting phenomena under investigation (Burgess *et al.*, 2006, p. 55.).

Through adopting this approach I am rejecting a positivistic paradigm that links to “assumed certainties and reliable facts” (Burgess *et al.*, 2006, p 54.) through a scientific enquiry into social phenomenon. Positivism adopts a methodological approach akin to the natural sciences and as such this involves ‘observation’ and ‘experiment’ (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p. 9.). It sees the “social scientist as an observer of reality” (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p. 10.). This leads to an approach that searches for laws and generalisations: again

a reflection of natural science and scientific method. It is this scientific and mechanistic approach that provokes an anti-positivist critique that rejects “science’s mechanistic and reductionist view of nature which... defines life in measurable terms rather than inner experience, and excludes notions of choice, freedom, individuality, and moral responsibility” (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p. 17.). Positivism has also been questioned by critical theorists, such as Horkheimer (1972), who suggests that through its reductive, and often mathematical approach, positivism loses a sense of subjectivity and uniqueness of human experience. Habermas (1972) goes further in suggesting that positivism has gained paradigmatic dominance to the exclusion of other forms of epistemology. Positivism can also be viewed as problematic as it “regards human behaviour as passive, essentially determined and controlled thereby ignoring intention, individualism and freedom”(Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p. 18.).

Positivism is rejected by a range of theories that reject its epistemological approach on the basis that human behaviour cannot be reduced to universal laws, but instead can only be understood from the actors participating in the action. This links to interpretive or naturalistic approaches, which would, in-turn, link to my own intention to establish how students make university choices through the way they engage with and make interpretations of the world. A range of characteristics of an interpretive approach can be identified, the main features however that link to my own research emphasis centre on a view that, “people interpret events, contexts and situations, and act on the basis of those events”(Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p. 21.). Through adopting an interpretive paradigm I accept an epistemological stance that allows the participants in the research to reveal

their reasons for university choice and accept that their perspectives will shape the research. This ties-in with a grounded theory approach to analysis that will be further developed below. This approach resists what Cohen calls “the imposition of external form and structure” (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p.21.) because the actors and their motivations are central.

### **5.3.2 Research perspectives**

Whilst I adopt an interpretive paradigm, and using a grounded theory approach to analysis, I also wish to inject a critical perspective into my approach. Literature examined (Halsey *et al.*, 1980; Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Reay, 1998; Reay, 2001) indicates that structural socio-economic factors significantly influence university choice. Whilst accepting that individual actors make choices, it would be naïve to assume that such choices are wholly discrete. Consequently I set out to integrate a critical perspective that “does not accept the socio-political status quo but seeks to challenge issues related to... all forms of oppression... [and]... seeks to provide greater understanding and an explanatory framework of inequalities” (Burgess *et al.*, 2006, p. 55.). A grounded theory approach to analysis can subsequently be assessed in the light of broader structural factors. Hence individual agency can be acknowledged, but this agency is nevertheless likely to be modified by social structure. Integrating a critical approach with a grounded theory approach should also help to mitigate some of the weaknesses of interpretive approaches for being overly micro-sociological (Cohen *et al.*, 2008).

Critical perspectives question the status quo and form a critique of both positivist and interpretivist paradigms as they neglect the “political and ideological contexts of much educational research” (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p. 26.). When specifically linked to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, they seek political action in terms of the emancipation of subordinate groups (Cohen *et al.*, 2008; Held, 1983). This is quite an ambitious approach that draws on a left political agenda. In my own terms I did seek to understand and reduce inequality in terms of university choice, and within the context of the Doctorate in Education had a unique opportunity to relate the findings of this research to my own college and my own professional practice. This did not presume a particular set of findings, but aimed to act on findings in terms of practice. Marxists and Marxians, such as Habermas and Freire, would term this *praxis*, and suggest the joint aim of both revealing inequalities within the education system and attempting to eliminate these inequalities (Cohen *et al.*, 2008; Habermas, 1979). Whilst the elimination of inequality is somewhat ‘ambitious’, an aim as a result of research can nevertheless attempt to modify institutional practices if appropriate. Critical approaches are not without their own critique which, according to Cohen *et al* (2008), is often in terms of their own overt political agenda. However critical theorists might retort that no research is politically or ideologically neutral (Cohen *et al.*, 2008).

When undertaking research, the research assumptions chosen have a significant impact on the way that data is collected and later analysed – and so point to a specific type of research approach. Research perspectives also suggest a given view on the nature of the validity of the data collected (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) and can have a direct link

to the research paradigm being adopted. Quantitative and qualitative research perspectives have often been pitched against one another, as mutually exclusive, and in support of a 'paradigm war' (Burgess *et al.*, 2006, p. 56.). More contemporary approaches are often more pragmatic and choose the type of paradigm or perspective according to need (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). This is quite an appealing suggestion, although perhaps problematic, as perspectives and paradigms chosen do embody a theoretical position, and so perhaps it is naïve to suggest that the adoption of a discrete perspective is divorced from such a position. Nevertheless, one can select a research perspective and approach that corresponds to the phenomena being studied (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). Certainly the choice of methodology, whether quantitative or qualitative, and associated issues requires consideration.

Within much of the social sciences and educational research (and perhaps obviously reflecting a dominant view in the natural sciences) a dominant paradigm emerges that favours a quantitative approach to research linked to an accepted view of research 'as science' that is linked to statistical analysis (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) . This is in turn linked to a positivist paradigm. This is in contrast with a phenomenological or interpretivist paradigm that seeks to "examine... people's words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants"(Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 2.). In this sense a broad division emerges between quantitative approaches that are often linked to positivism, and qualitative approaches that are linked to interpretivism. Also, within quantitative approaches a corresponding critique is provided that suggests that qualitative research

lacks rigour in the collection and analysis of data and is consequently unscientific (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 9.). It can also be suggested that qualitative research has not been accepted as well as its quantitative counterpart, perhaps as a consequence of the emergent qualities of the qualitative perspective (Lincoln, 1995). In terms of my own perspective I intended to adopt a qualitative position, so a discussion of the benefits and pitfalls of such an approach was required.

Qualitative approaches, whilst less dominant in research, nevertheless gain a significant range of support for a number of reasons (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Lincoln, 1995; Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Bogden and Bilken (1992) suggest that qualitative research possesses five distinctive features. Firstly they point to such research as situated in a 'natural setting' where the "researcher is the key instrument"(Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 29.) to ensure that the research captures the 'context' of the area of investigation. However this does not seem particularly unique as much quantitative research is also in the field. Nevertheless, such context can also impact on the way the researcher understands the situation. Secondly they point to the descriptive nature of research and thirdly to the importance of understanding "process"(Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 31.). In terms of data analysis Bogdan and Bilken make a fourth feature of qualitative research: inductive data analysis (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). This links to grounded theory and a view that theory should be generated by the data. Finally they point to a concern with 'meaning', i.e. to "the ways that people make sense of their lives... [and provide]... participant perspectives" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 32.). This links to the importance of interpretation in

qualitative research to the extent that actors (research participants) interpret their reality. It is important to record this interpretation through 'empathic understanding', with this understanding the qualitative researcher needs to identify "patterns within... words... and actions... and present those patterns for others to inspect"(Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 18.). It can also be noted that qualitative researchers adopt a specific posture when undertaking research that contrasts with quantitative approaches (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Such a posture is rooted in a set of postulates that are grounded in a specific, and interpretive or phenomenological, ontological view (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 25.).

Consequently what emerges is an oppositional axis in terms of qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative approach links to a dominant view that objectivity, linked to science is desirable in research, whilst subjectivity in contrast is not a reflection of the truth (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). However being subjective, for interpretivists, demonstrates an awareness of 'agency'. It is this agency that interpretive approaches seek to record and interpret. Interpretive, qualitative research, also acknowledges that the researcher is also a participant in the research and does not stand aloof from the research process (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). From this perspective I reject objectivity through statistical methods (employed by quantitative research) in favour of a 'human-as-instrument' approach for the purpose of data collection and analysis (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p.25.). This links to a view that suggests that the only way to capture the dynamic nature of human behaviour is through such an approach (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The individual researcher is the research instrument



and as such has the benefit of being “responsive, adaptable and holistic”(Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p.26.).

Whilst supporting a qualitative position, Bogdan and Bilken (1992) point to the pitfalls of the ‘interplay’ between researcher and participant noting a loss of neutrality. However this approach implies a judgement of qualitative research through a positivist and scientific epistemology that values the researcher distancing themselves from the research subject. Instead of competing with such an approach one can, through adopting a different epistemological view, accept that qualitative research can have rigour in terms of its own criteria – which emphasise the importance of subjectivity. Lincoln and Guba seek such rigour with the aim of gaining parity with the positivist paradigm, but parity on the basis of an approach with a different conception of research and validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Lincoln (1995) points to a move away from a quantitative/qualitative axis, or dualism, that focuses on an opposition between “subject-object, true-false, objective-subjective” (Lincoln, 1995, p. 276.), instead proposing a new paradigm for inquiry.

It is not simply a case of changing perspectives or research methods to achieve valid data, which are judged against consistent criteria, but is more the case that research paradigms have significance in identifying which criteria are important in the first place. The traditional scientific paradigm utilises a quantitative approach, demands rigour and is judged in methodological terms in relation to criteria such as reliability and objectivity (Lincoln, 1995). Qualitative perspectives are often criticised for lacking these criteria.

This is where the paradigmatic significance becomes clear. Qualitative perspectives based on an interpretivist or naturalistic paradigm are informed by an alternative epistemology and so seek different criteria such as “dependability, credibility, confirmability and authenticity”(Lincoln, 1995, p. 277.). This can be taken further through suggesting that new criteria are required that emerge from a new paradigm (Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In summary, the criteria Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest link to parity in relation to the researcher and the subjects and the democratisation of the research process. This constitutes a separate research paradigm.

It is scientific inquiry that embraces a set of three new commitments: first, to new and emergent relations with respondents; second, to a set of stances – professional, personal and political – towards the use of inquiry and towards the ability to foster action; and finally, to a vision of research that enables and promotes social justice, community, diversity, civic discourse, and caring” (Lincoln, 1995, pp. 277-278.)

Whilst this does seem to have some of the emphasis of research in a significant way that is more ‘political’ and ethical, this is arguably within the interpretivist tradition – although injects a political edge into research. This relates to my own critical perspective. Such an approach also suggests that research is a “process of continuous revision and enrichment of understanding of the experience of form of action under study” (Lincoln, 1995, p 278. ).

In examining research perspectives Burgess *et al* (2006) note a flexible approach indicating a choice of methodology linked to the intentions of the researcher. This suggests that an approach is chosen as a consequence of specific research questions. This corresponds to my own approach. I am concerned with the dynamics of the way that students make choices and in doing so interpret the world around them. Consequently I adopt a qualitative approach. It is interesting to consider the view that the very framing of research questions is, in any event, situated and lacks neutrality. Corbin and Strauss note that “committed qualitative researchers tend to frame their research questions in such a way that the only manner in which they can be answered is through qualitative research” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 13. ). Consequently one may well construct questions that then demand a research approach that corresponds to one’s own epistemological view. So whilst Corbin and Strauss appear ‘open’ in relation to methodological perspectives, they nevertheless support a view of qualitative research that rejects ‘traditional objectivity’ in favour of an epistemology that views ‘ideas as provisional’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 14.).

### **5.3.3 Research approaches**

Having adopted a qualitative research perspective it remains important to identify the research approach, and later the research methods, that I will adopt. Quite a daunting range of research approaches that can sit within a myriad of typologies can be identified (Burgess *et al.*, 2006; Creswell, 2007). However in identifying an approach I remain focussed on my specific research questions and my aim to identify and generate explanations and motivations for choice from the perspective of my research subjects.

Whilst Burgess *et al* (2006) identify three approaches I intend to turn to and rely on the typology provided by Creswell (2007). This offers a more comprehensive survey of approaches that are summarised in terms of five broad representative groupings: narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic and case study.

Narrative approaches are not really suitable for my research aims for a number of reasons, but most significantly because they would limit the number of participants. One or two participants generally provide the focus for narrative research, and so this does not correspond to my research aims, nor is it feasible within the timescale for my research (Creswell, 2007) .

In contrast phenomenological research aims to look at the ‘lived experience’ of a number of participants to ascertain commonality through experiencing chosen phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The key to such an approach, according to Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994), is an intention for the researcher to ‘ignore their own experiences’ to enable new perspectives to emerge from the participants. This does, in my view, not acknowledge fully that research is situated, or accept that the researcher is central to the research process ‘as research instrument’ (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 29.), as discussed above. Additionally, a further weakness appears as “bracketing personal experiences may be difficult for the researcher to implement” (Creswell, 2007, p. 62.).

In practical terms it is not possible to undertake ethnographic research. Ethnographic research links to distinctive cultural groups and also usually involves participant observation where “the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 68.) of the respondents. This is neither feasible, nor desirable, in terms of addressing my research questions. In epistemological terms it also implies that one can obtain ‘objective’ information (Creswell, 2007, p. 69.), at least in terms of realist ethnography, and hence is at odds with my perspective. Whilst critical ethnography takes a more political stance, and is closer to my perspective in terms of the emancipatory aspect of research, it also accepts an objectivist view. Ethnography is extremely time-consuming and it would be difficult to fit within the parameters of the Doctorate in Education.

Case studies, like other approaches, can be interpreted in different ways (Creswell, 2007) and are a ‘broad approach’ to research (Burgess *et al.*, 2006) rather than a technique that can involve a choice in terms of what is studied (Stake, 2005). However Creswell (2007) and others (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) point to case studies as a distinctive approach to methodology. In these terms a case study:

explores a bounded (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information... and reports a case description and case based themes (Creswell, 2007, p. 73.).

In choosing an approach, Creswell (2007) points to fundamental differences in terms of the objectives desired. In my own terms, the approach chosen needs to correspond to the focus of my research questions and to my own objectives in addressing such questions. Consequently I have chosen to adopt a grounded theory research approach to suit my aims. This approach seeks to “generate or discover a theory” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63.), but this theoretical understanding is generated through the experiences of the research participants rather than through imposition by the researcher. Grounded theory will give me the opportunity to study the way that students make choices in terms of university choices. This approach will then allow for the development of a theory, grounded in data from the research, which can be compared with theoretical frameworks identified through reviewing the literature. Whilst grounded theory can be employed in differing ways, and in particular in relation to the extent to which data collection and analysis is structured (discussed below), it nevertheless provides a broad approach suitable for my intentions as it enables the researcher to understand the process that respondents have experienced in making their decision about university choice.

Grounded theory does however pose some significant problems. One significant issue relates to the extent to which the grounded approach is flexible. Consequently, the structure of data analysis will require further discussion below. Data analysis can be completed utilising the more structured approach of Corbin and Strauss (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to the more adaptable approach of Charmaz (2006). This forms the basis of discussion.

## **5.4 Research design and research methods**

This research consists of focus groups and interviews. These methods supported my aim to generate knowledge that is rich, detailed and potentially insightful.

### **5.4.1 Focus groups**

Focus groups have a number of advantages. They enable a range of responses to be gained in a short space of time and, at least in terms of data collection, are economical for the researcher to complete. Focus groups also allow the observer to record respondents' views mediated through interaction, such interaction should provide rich responses that relate to the research questions. Hutchings and Archer (2001) suggest that a key advantage of focus groups, "lay in the opportunity they afford to tap into... jointly constructed discourse... [and]... interactions with each other" (Hutchings and Archer, 2001, p.72.). This can be taken further where interaction elicits "data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (Morgan, 1997, p.2.). Utilising focus groups also enables rapid comparisons between responses:

Group discussions provide direct evidence about similarities and differences in participants' opinions and experiences as opposed to reaching such conclusions from post hoc analyses of separate statements from each interviewee. (Morgan, 1997, p. 10.)

Other advantages of focus groups can be identified, such as enabling the group to control the focus of the discussions and so potentially facilitating material otherwise

unanticipated (Morgan, 1997). This has advantages in terms of ‘idea generation’ and again can produce a rich source of information. Focus groups offer a degree of control to the researcher to steer responses towards research questions, whilst also allowing group interaction that can be a “valuable source of insights into complex behaviors and motivations” (Morgan, 1997, p. 15.).

### **5.4.2 Interviews**

Through completing interviews I built on responses from focus groups. Interviews share many of the advantages of focus groups, but allow more detail to be derived from an individual respondent. Interviews, that are not overly structured, also fit into a broadly interpretivist approach to research which seeks to obtain knowledge from interaction between interviewer and respondent (Kvale, 1996), and consequently root knowledge within a social situation (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). In terms of my research questions conducting interviews had a distinct purpose. They enabled me to establish what respondents know, their values and their attitudes (Cohen *et al.*, 2008; Tuckman, 1972). Additionally interviews were used for the same aims and to build on and corroborate insights gained through focus groups.

One can argue that interviews have some distinct technical advantages. Where a respondent does not understand a question, or requires further clarification, the interviewer is able to respond to any concerns (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). This also allows for greater depth than many other methods (Cohen *et al.*, 2008).



Interviews differ in terms of degree of structure and standardisation, from wholly unstructured to the use of closed questions. I utilised semi-structured interviews (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992) that employed standardised themes in relation to each respondent. Cohen *et al.* (2008) term this an 'interview guide approach'. "Topics and issues to be covered are specified in advance, in outline form; interviewer decides sequence and working of questions in the course of the interview" (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p.353.). This guided responses broadly in terms of the area for discussion, for example 'family', but then allowed scope for respondents to include which aspects are significant for them in terms of higher education 'choice'. This focus on significance to the respondent enabled the research to be grounded.

In adopting both focus groups and interviews as research methods I accept that such qualitative methods do have limitations. Focus groups are less detailed than interviews in terms of material that can be elicited from each respondent (Morgan, 1997), whereas interviews allow 'closer communication', and enable the interviewer to control the interaction more as well as giving respondents more opportunity to expand on responses (Morgan, 1997). However as suggested, focus groups give more control to a group of respondents. Both methods have the drawback that the researcher can influence the data. Consequently, in the focus groups it was important to avoid, or mitigate, the negative effects of peer influence.

I utilised instruments that enabled me to standardise themes and allowed me the opportunity to probe issues further to add to the depth of responses, thus increasing

validity (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). Through the use of open-ended questions in both methods, and with the scope to encourage students to elaborate on answers, this also allowed for 'unanticipated responses' (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p.357.). Through using standardised themes I was also able to make some comparisons.

## **5.5 Sampling strategies**

### **Stratified and purposive sampling**

The target population was based on my own college, with a sampling frame drawn from 16-19 year old sixth-form students undertaking Level Three qualifications (Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulations, 2012), which were predominately General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Levels. It was difficult to utilise large numbers of participants, which hampered generalisations, but I wished to achieve a degree of representativeness through my research questions. I ensured that a degree of stratified sampling was employed to obtain an equal gender distribution (Bell, 2005). To ensure that my research questions could be addressed I utilised a purposive sample to allow for *theoretical relevance* (see Pilot Study, p. 115.). Theoretical sampling was also employed in the interview stage of the research to further probe and investigate emerging theoretical categories (see pp. 123-124.). To assess the social class characteristics of the participants a short questionnaire was utilised during the pilot stage and of the research. For the main stage of the research parental occupation was identified through utilising data completed on the UCAS form as well as a short questionnaire. These identified parental occupational background as an indication of social class. This

is discussed further in the Research Procedures section [5.10, pp. 125-127, also see Appendix 11.5].

I undertook a pilot study to test my focus group methodology. I then completed three further focus groups comprising 12 further students. These utilised a clear schedule of research themes. Through a group of respondents interacting with one another, I hope that “the views of the participants can emerge... [and the respondents]... agenda can predominate” (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p.376.). Responses received were coded to identify emerging themes and enabled the development of a more refined interview schedule for later research. This also served as an effective and time efficient way of collecting and analysing data. I then undertook eighteen interviews to further examine these themes and employed a constant comparative method of analysis.

## **5.6 Methodological issues**

In undertaking any research project a range of criteria require examination that point to the relative merits and limitations of a given research methodology. These include reliability, validity and trustworthiness, representativeness and generalisability, bias and prejudice, and the role and influence of the researcher.

### **5.6.1 Validity, or validation, and reliability**

Validity, or validation, and reliability in research are contested and complex concepts. Whilst validity can be conceptualised in a number of ways it is an important methodological requirement for all research, although is arguably achieved through

different means within different research paradigms and perspectives and consequently have been defined and labelled in different ways (Creswell, 2007). Whilst the term validity is controversial in nature, it can nevertheless be defined in basic terms as something that is achieved when research methods measure what they intended to measure (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). In quantitative research, validity may well be seen in terms of accuracy of sampling and statistical methodology (Cohen *et al.*, 2008), whereas in qualitative research, validity is seen in terms of “honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants’ approached, the extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher” (Burgess *et al.*, 2006, p.62.).

In terms of an interpretivist paradigm that adopts a naturalistic approach, Cohen (2008), citing Lincoln and Guba (1985), identifies a number of key principles in relation to validity that suggest that research should be ‘socially situated’ and include the researcher as a key participant in the research process. Data should be analysed in an inductive way from the perspective of the respondents to encapsulate their intentions (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). Such an approach leads to what Maxwell (1992) terms ‘authenticity’ in relation to understanding and the way that understanding is constructed. This also links to a grounded theory approach.

### **5.6.2 Trustworthiness**

Different research traditions emerge that encapsulate contrasting notions of validating knowledge (Creswell, 2007). Consequently rigid sets of criteria that apply to all research paradigms are not apparent. In contrast to the language and conceptualisation of validity

presented in positivist research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) point to an alternative language of research that is more appropriate for an interpretivist or naturalistic paradigm (Creswell, 2007). This emphasises the 'trustworthiness' of research and employs concepts such as 'credibility' and 'authenticity' (Creswell, 2007. p. 202.). Eisner (1991) also points to the credibility of research as significant suggesting that "the weight of the evidence should become persuasive" (Creswell, 2007, p. 204.). Angen (2000) reinforces such an approach indicating that research should fundamentally "become... a moral question that must be addressed from the inception of the research endeavour to its completion" (Angen, 2000. p 387.). The resultant formulation of validity, or validation – to emphasise trustworthiness, according to Angen (2000) - is found in 'ethical validation' and 'substantive validation' (Angen, 2000. p. 387.) Creswell summarises:

Ethical validation means that all research agendas must question their underlying moral assumptions, their political and ethical implications and the equitable treatment of diverse voices. It also requires... practical answers to questions (Creswell, 2007. p. 205.).

Substantive validation, as Angen suggests:

Includes a consideration of one's own understandings of the topic, understanding derived from other sources, and an accounting of this process in the written record of the study (Angen, 2000. p. 390.).

This enables other researchers to evaluate the research and make a judgement about the 'trustworthiness'. This in-turn links back to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notion of trustworthiness as a key indication of the validity of the research. This, in my view, is a significant aspect of interpretive inquiry.

### **5.6.3 Generalisability and representativeness, fittingness and translatability**

In relation to external validity the issue of generalisability is also pertinent (Campbell and Stanley, 1963; Schofield, 2007). In terms of generalisability, judgments are often made in relation to the extent to which the findings of the research "hold up beyond the specific research subjects and the setting involved" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p.44.) and offer representativeness in terms of findings. Also, a significant effort has been made within the quantitative tradition to explore how the generalisability of research can be increased, whilst emphasising that the opposite has largely been true in more qualitative literature (Schofield, 2007).

In much qualitative research however this 'conventional' (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p.45.) notion of generalisability is not accepted. Traditional notions of generalisation that sit within a positivistic paradigm link to what Cohen (2008) terms "comparability and translatability" (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p. 169.). If the research is generalisable then the findings can then be applied to a larger population or situation (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1993) and results will "hold up beyond the specific research subjects and the setting involved" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p.44.). However such a concept is vigorously contested. Within a positivist tradition one can "argue that generalization is essential"

(Hitchcock and Hughes, 1993, p.27.), whilst for more interpretivist approaches generalisation is either delivered on a small scale, of no importance (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1993; Schofield, 2007), considered to be a role for someone else (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992), unachievable (Schofield, 2007) or conceptualised in a different way. In practical terms it is also problematic as

It is highly unlikely that any research the teacher will ... [undertake]... could ever be large enough to sustain the kinds of high-level generalizations that are seen to be a crucial part of the scientific method (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1993, p. 27.).

In approaches that are interpretive, notions of generalisation can be conceptualised in differing ways. Where in a positivist interpretation generalisability is concerned with the generalisability of findings, in interpretative research a great deal of emphasis is placed on the extent to which the researcher interacts and influences the research process (Schofield, 2007). Schofield notes:

The goal is *not* to produce a standardized set of results that any other careful researcher in the same situation... would have produced. Rather it is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of that situation (Schofield, 2007, p. 183.).

Within much interpretive research the approach to generalisability links to “the question of to which other settings and subjects they are generalizable” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 45.). Hence it is the social processes that emerge from the research and the extent to which these can be applied to other situations that constitute generalisability. So generalisability is important, but in relation to the extent to which one is able to apply research findings to a range of situations or circumstances. This links to a view proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1981; 1982) who reject the view that generalisation can be context-free and applicable to a range of situations, but instead propose the substitution of generalisability with the concept of *fittingness*.

They argue that the concept of ‘fittingness’, with its emphasis on analysing the degree to which the situation studied matches other situations in which one is interested, provides a more realistic and workable way of thinking about the generalizability of research results (Schofield, 2007, p. 187.).

To enable this approach, studies need to include a depth in the detail to enable comparisons. Schofield (2007) also points to Goetz and Lecompte (1984) as they also emphasise the importance of reporting detailed findings to enable ‘comparability’ and ‘translatability’ as do Lecompte and Preissle (1993, p. 47.). Finally Schofield (2007) suggests that consensus is emerging concerning qualitative generalisation. This involves a rejection of generalisability as a process that establishes universal laws, but an acceptance that comparing situations is worthwhile. To enable worthwhile comparison



very detailed description is required. This approach can be utilised in the formation of grounded theory (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

#### **5.6.4 Reliability and replicability**

In adopting a qualitative research perspective I acknowledge that limitations will be apparent in relation to the test-retest reliability of the data collected. Reliability is often judged in relation to the replicability of research over a given period to test and corroborate findings (Cohen *et al.*, 2008) and consequently test the “consistency of results”(Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 48.), and as such favours quantitative methodologies that provide ‘precision’ and ‘accuracy’ – such as closed questions. In these terms qualitative methods have been significantly criticised in terms of reliability:

qualitative methodologies, whilst possessing immediacy, flexibility, authenticity, richness and candour, are criticized for being impressionistic, biased, commonplace, insignificant, ungeneralizable, idiosyncratic, subjective and short-sighted (Ruddock, 1981). (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p.149.).

The methodology in this research cannot offer test-retest reliability as understood in the positivist paradigm, as through utilising relatively unstructured interviews and focus groups, responses are not standardised and uniform. Moreover, as Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggest “qualitative researchers do not share exactly this expectation”(Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 48.). In contrast they offer data that possesses depth, detail and consequently unpredictability. However, this is not to say that issues of reliability lack

relevance in qualitative research. Whilst the “uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of situations” (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p.148.) are the strength of much research this nevertheless prevents replicability. Although the term is contested, issues of ‘dependability’ of findings are nevertheless relevant (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). In particular Cohen *et al* (2008) suggest different strands of research that indicate that replicability is possible in terms of factors such as:

the status position of the researcher... the choice of informant/respondent...  
the social situation and condition... the analytic constructs and premises that  
are used... the methods of data collection and analysis (Cohen *et al.*, 2008,  
p.148.).

What remains important is the relationship between the research data that is recorded and “what actually occurs in reality”(Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p.48.). Whilst these kinds of issues are contested, they nevertheless give an indication of the kinds of issues that need to be considered in relation to this research, not least in terms of consistency. Notions of consistency could also be examined in terms of ‘fittingness’ with other comparable research, both historical and contemporary. This could also add to a notion of validity (Gubba and Lincoln, 1982; Schofield, 1993).

## **5.7 Ethics**

The following section considers some of the ethical concerns raised by the research. It should at the outset be stated that it was most important to ensure that the Universities

and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) choices that the research participant had elected to make were respected and valued in an appropriate way. Whilst the nature of the research inevitably considers the possible prestige or ranking that a Higher Education Institution (HEI) may acquire, and the reasons to seek or avoid such prestige, this in no way diminishes from any of the choices made and the value that a university education will provide.

#### **5.7.1 Practical considerations and procedures: permissions and informed consent**

I obtained written permission from the college principal prior to undertaking research and kept him informed regarding progress. I also maintained confidentiality and anonymity in relation to the college and students, who were not named. I used a consent form, outlining the nature of the research, and emphasised voluntary participation. It was also emphasised that respondents could leave the research at any point and if desired they were made aware that their responses would not be used in the research findings. Clearly this had the potential to disrupt the flow of the research, as data would need to be destroyed, but this was paramount to maintain a consistent ethical position. If responses were used, respondents were made aware that they were able to see transcripts if required. Information concerning consent was also provided (Creswell, 2007), in the form of a document, sent before research commenced. This document explained the nature of the research providing *informed consent* and was important in avoiding deception. Participants needed to be aware of the context of the research and the possibility that findings, although anonymised, could be published. This enabled respondents to judge whether they would participate in the research and also ensured

that my approach was consistent (Oliver, 2009). It also needed to avoid providing too much information as this might have tainted participant responses (Mercer, 2007). This emphasises the balance required when considering ethical concerns. I also needed to be aware that I might need to terminate an interview if the respondents seemed uncomfortable, and although this situation did not occur, respondents were aware that they could cease involvement in the research at any point (Oliver, 2009).

### **5.7.2 The role of the researcher: maintaining distance, avoiding bias and prejudice**

My role as a Pastoral Adviser and Tutor, involving providing UCAS advice, could have directly compromised, or could have been compromised by, my role as a researcher. Consequently issues surrounding insider research need some discussion to demonstrate that I did not significantly compromise my professional role at the college.

In particular I needed to ensure that I did not give unfair advantage or detriment to research participants (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). To partly deal with this concern I ensured that my sample of students was chosen from students who belonged to a different pastoral adviser's team with whom I have no routine responsibility or contact apart from routine teaching. However, my familiarity with the setting was still an issue, although it improved access to the sample and my understanding of the context (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). It could nevertheless affect my findings as some of my respondents may have been aware of my views regarding university choice (Mercer, 2007). They might also have modified their responses to placate me as the researcher. Conversely I might have felt a 'pastoral obligation' (Mercer, 2007; Porter, 1984) to the students that negates a

totally detached approach to research. To mitigate such bias a number of measures were taken to ensure that as an 'insider researcher' I maintained a degree of distance, as my 'familiarity' with the college community might have caused problems (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). To facilitate a more distanced approach the use of semi-structured questions in my interviews was advantageous. Whilst this does not detach the researcher and respondent from one another, it does maintain some distance through imposing a degree of structure when asking questions (Burgess *et al.*, 2006; Mercer, 2007). Recording focus groups and interviews electronically and coding responses also mitigated some possible problems such as taking responses for granted as an insider researcher (Mercer, 2007). Indeed, the systematic nature of grounded theory as a means to data analysis has for some removed the need to discuss ethics (Olesen, 2007). Whilst I do not find this appropriate, I nevertheless note that the systematic approach taken does help to reduce bias.

However, this kind of research also presented me with some noteworthy advantages in terms of ease of access to the research participants, a degree of flexibility in data collection and a clearer understanding and appreciation of the nuances of a given situation (Mercer, 2007).

### **5.7.3 Reciprocity**

Whilst undertaking grounded theory research one needs to establish an approach that is beneficial to both researcher and participant and ensure that no harm occurs (Birks and

Mills, 2011). Such a reciprocal approach enabled me to negate some of the differentials between participants and myself (Birks and Mills, 2011). This was achieved through the research methods utilised. Adopting a semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed respondents to take some control over the focus of interactions, as did the focus groups. In addition, as a compensation for participation in the research and to provide reciprocity in terms of benefits (Cohen *et al.*, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Martin, 2000), respondents were offered practical support subsequent to the research to help with their UCAS applications (Mercer, 2007). This support corresponded to my existing advisory pastoral role in the college and consisted of advice concerning completion of the electronic UCAS form as well as guiding students to sources of information concerning HEIs. Consequently I did not influence students or give additional support that could not have been accessed elsewhere in the college.

#### **5.7.4 Anonymity, respect and accuracy**

During the writing-up phase of the research it was also important to retain anonymity for respondents (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). Names were changed to achieve this end, both for participants, family members and the college. In recording and representing the views of respondents it was also important to accurately represent their opinions in a 'respectful' way without utilising prejudice or 'stereotypes' (Creswell, 2007). I also consistently questioned the accuracy of the final themes to, "be an accurate reflection of what they said" (Creswell, 2007, p. 45.). In terms of the future dissemination of research, participants were informed at the consent stage and during the research that findings might be published but anonymity retained. Finally I also ensured that I adhered to

British Educational Research Association 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research'  
(British Education Research Association, 1992).

## **5.8 Pilot study**

To commence the research a pilot study was completed to test the focus group and to begin to address research questions.

Choosing to undertake a fairly unstructured focus group enabled an assessment of both the applicability of an interpretive paradigm to the research and an assessment of the practical problems that might arise. It also allowed a preliminary consideration of a grounded approach.

In terms of the choice of participants some initial ethical problems were identified. It was clear that as an 'insider' I could have a conflict of interests if choosing participants for whom I held pastoral responsibility, as my primary concern would be delivering appropriate advice to students at the cost of maintaining distance as a researcher. Consequently I utilised a colleague to act as a 'gatekeeper' (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p. 109.) to choose research participants for whom she had the pastoral responsibility. My colleague acted as a combination of gatekeeper and sponsor. She was able to identify students who would be suitable to participate through her role as a pastoral adviser.

To address research questions relating to access to, and uses of, social and cultural capital and the extent to which this links to inter and intra class differences a

“purposively selected sample” (Morgan, 1997, p. 35.) was utilised. This technique was employed primarily to ensure that participants would “hold a shared perspective on the research topic” (Morgan, 1997, p. 35.) and consequently would lead to ‘meaningful discussions’. This would also allow for “*theoretical relevance* for furthering the development of emerging categories” (Glaser and Strauss, 2009, p.51.) to enable, to some extent, the utilisation of a grounded approach. Students were also segmented, as they all belonged to a specific teaching group in the same year, to allow for homogeneity and in-turn a “more free-flowing conversation” (Morgan, 1997, p.35.) and to facilitate “normal, day-to-day interaction” (Morgan, 1997, p.36.). Whilst social class is significantly incorporated into the research questions, I decided that selecting the sample wholly on the basis of social class was unnecessary at this pilot phase. Following Morgan (1997, p.37.) I utilised the initial study sample as a ‘pre-test group’, and respondents completed a brief preliminary questionnaire to provide a demographic profile and enable identification of social class.

The students identified as suitable for the research were all in the first year at the college, and had not yet started the UCAS application process. They were deliberately chosen to give an indication of the extent of knowledge about university choice prior to application. Whilst they would almost probably know less about higher education than in a years’ time, it was beneficial to investigate their knowledge at this point. It was then feasible to involve them in the research at a later date to identify how their perspective might have changed. In terms of recruitment, my colleague approached students to invite them to participate in the research. If they were interested in participating I then



explained the research project and gave them a document outlining the research and seeking their agreement to participate. This ensured that I obtained informed consent and consequently complied with accepted ethical standards (British Education Research Association, 1992). I decided to utilise a relatively small group of participants, eight students, as in practical terms I thought that students would be prepared to cooperate on the basis of their shared class membership. I also envisaged that a smaller group would add to the depth of the research through allowing participants ample time to make contributions. In terms of participation I did encounter problems. Some students who initially agreed to participate later realised that they were taking part in a college trip. Consequently further students were invited to join the research. As a practical result of this one student was invited to participate who did not belong to the same teaching group, although he was a member of other teaching groups with a number of the participants. In summary eight students were invited and agreed to attend. Four were male and four female to further stratify the sample, although one of the male respondents did not attend.

The focus group was undertaken during lunchtime over approximately one hour. To build on my intention to undertake interpretative research I elected to keep the group fairly unstructured, although I used a schedule of broad questions. It is useful as a device for a pilot study as it should allow participants to shift away from “researcher imposed agendas” (Morgan, 1997, p.40.) if necessary and give participants the opportunity to investigate their own perspectives. It also provided a guide to the way that I should focus and more sharply structure questions for the later stages of the research. Whilst less

structured focus groups mean that comparisons with other groups are difficult (Morgan, 1997), this should not be a problem for preliminary use, and in any event a more unstructured approach should offer more depth and address research questions. Prior to commencing the focus group students were reminded of the nature of the research and the obligations and undertakings given by the researcher when providing informed consent. Students were then asked to complete a short questionnaire that identified criteria such as parents' occupation, parental education, receipt of Educational Maintenance Allowance and other factors. The focus group lasted one hour, was digitally recorded and reasons for recording events explained.

The pilot study served two purposes. It enabled the testing of the practical aspects of the focus group, and pointed to where improvements could be made; for example it enabled me to sharpen up the questions utilised. Secondly, the data collected, and systematically coded, gave some clear insights into the process of choice and the themes and influences that were emerging. This also enabled further questions to be devised to address emerging themes. These in particular focussed on locality and sibling influence. The results of the pilot study were carried forward and combined with the results of the main study. These were subsequently analysed utilising a grounded theory approach, outlined below.

## **5.9 Data collection and analysis**

The data analysis was to 'generate themes' (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p.461.) and produce theories to reveal the significant features of the way respondents used non-economic

capital and arrived at their course choices. Themes will be grouped around non-economic capital and will be organised in relation to each research question to 'preserve coherence' (Cohen *et al.*, 2008 p.468.). Through utilising a methodology that allows for unanticipated responses, I am aware that different themes and subsequent theoretical considerations will emerge through the systematic process of coding. This broadly follows a 'grounded theory' approach. My initial research interest stems from my own experiences together with a reading of relevant literature. To ensure that the research does not lose sight of the actual experiences of respondents, the grounded theory approach was chosen. This links to my desire to establish how students make choices and subsequently theories can be formulated in relation to these choices. This also links to the theoretical frameworks identified above through reviewing the literature but can also utilise an inductive approach to qualitative research suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992). Grounded theory inverts a traditional approach that aims to test hypothesis or theory with data, suggesting instead that research should commence through examining data and subsequently develop theory from 'grounded' data (Birks and Mills, 2011; Glaser and Strauss, 2009). However, I recognise that I have not solely used a grounded theory approach to my overall research, but used a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis. Theory did not solely stem from experience: nevertheless experience significantly modified theoretical constructs examined.

Data collection and analysis are inextricably linked to the nature of research questions under consideration and the broader theoretical concerns that link to research paradigms, perspectives and approaches. The way that one chooses a methodology can have an

impact on data analysis, “as it focuses the researchers attention on different dynamics and alerts them to the possible analytic configurations in the process of conceptual and theoretical abstractions” (Birks and Mills, 2011, p. 4.). These broader issues in turn relate back to the precise nature of the research questions and a range of factors can determine the nature of data analysis including the significance of utilising research concepts from other sources (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). These will inevitably include concepts that were originally established through the literature review, such as Bourdieu (1998) and Reay (2001b), in combination with, and related to, the insights and knowledge that emerge from the experiences and attitudes of college students.

In purist or first generation grounded theory an approach is adopted that suggests conducting the literature review after the primary research (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 2009). This is to avoid forcing data into pre-determined or preconceived categories and applying these to one’s research. Whilst such a tactic presents a purist approach to inductive research, if oversimplified it also suggests a degree of naivety (Charmaz, 2006). Researchers inevitably bring prior knowledge and preconceived ideas to research, it is an awareness of this knowledge that seems crucial so that one can approach existing literature with criticality, and so examine emerging grounded data with neutrality.

In adopting a grounded theory approach I follow broad conceptual principles and investigations outlined by Glaser and Strauss (2009) who foreground the notion of “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser and Strauss, 2009, p.1.) and emphasise that

“grounded theory is a general method of comparative analysis” (Glaser and Strauss, 2009, p.1). Whilst they do not reject research as a means of verifying theory, they suggest that the process is over-emphasised. This appears to link to my own research questions. Whilst I am keen to examine the relevance of concepts of cultural and social capital, I do not wish to impose such categories, but wish to establish the ‘grounded’ experience of respondents in relation to the significance of different types of non-economic capital in terms of influencing choice. This should ensure, to some degree, that the theory that emerges is grounded in the data.

Cohen *et al.* (2008) emphasise the emergent nature of theory that is derived from a grounded theory approach:

In everyday life, actions are interconnected and people make connections naturally; it is part of everyday living, and hence grounded theory catches the naturalistic element of research and formulates it into a systematic methodology (Cohen *et al.*, 2008, p.491.).

Consequently theory is not developed through the examination of literature, but stems from the experiences of the research participants. Grounded theory was developed in the 1960s by Glaser and Strauss (2009) and later by Corbin and Strauss (2008) who aimed to systematically derive theories “from the field, especially in the actions, interactions, and social processes of people” (Creswell, 2007, p.63.). However beyond this starting point, or first generation of grounded theory, disagreements have arisen and different

theoretical perspectives have emerged (Creswell, 2007). These include quite a prescriptive and structured approach linked to Strauss (Glaser and Strauss, 2009), a constructivist approach associated with Charmaz (2006) and Clarke's (2005) situational approach that challenges positivist notions of grounded theory and makes a link to postmodernism.

Creswell (2007) notes that in grounded theory research procedures proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), the development of theory is systematic and explains "process, action, or interaction" (Creswell, 2007, p. 64.). The researcher collects data from primary research methods to 'saturate' emerging categories or events. During data collection data analysis also emerges. Hence the process is symbiotic: the data feeds the analysis but the analysis also feeds back into the research questions. To drive such a process forward the researcher employs a 'constant comparative' method of data analysis that involves comparing emergent information. This approach also drives 'theoretical sampling' where participants are chosen to enable theoretical understanding to progress (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007).

Whilst a notion of grounded theory proposed by Charmaz (2006) has many similarities, its primary point of departure links to an acceptance that the world is a diverse and complex place and hence rejects the development "of a single process or core category" (Creswell, 2007, p. 65.) instead accepting the complexity of "diverse local worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions" (Creswell, 2007, p. 65.). Through injecting an interpretive approach and developing a

constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz introduces a more flexible framework that allows for both diverse views and beliefs of the individual respondent as well as the researcher (Creswell, 2007). This acknowledges that the researcher is an active participant in the research.

Qualitative research employing a grounded theory approach means that a large amount of unstructured data is generated that requires careful management. A methodological consensus emerges within grounded theory that this is achieved through a systematic coding system (Birks and Mills, 2011; Burgess *et al.*, 2006; Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009). For Charmaz, codes are 'constructed' by the researcher: "We may think our codes capture the empirical reality. Yet it is *our* views: we choose the words that constitute our codes" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47.). Consequently, for Charmaz, the process is interactive. The researcher and the respondent both participate.

In terms of a process for grounded theory I follow Charmaz's constructivist approach and this links to my own research perspective. This process for grounded theory includes data collection, coding, analysis and theory generation (Charmaz, 2006). This involves a first cycle method of coding (Saldaña, 2009) to enable raw data from primary research to be coded in order to conceptualise ideas. This is achieved through 'in vivo', 'process' and 'initial coding' that produce labels for the data:

Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data. Coding is the

first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43.).

Following this initial phase of coding, where the researcher identifies 'significant categories' (Creswell, 2007, p. 64.) the researcher then produces a series of analytic memos to enable the development of an analysis of 'thoughts', 'comparisons' and 'questions' that arise (Charmaz, 2006, p. 73.). These begin to produce 'tentative analytic categories'. These then lead to a process of 'axial coding' where the researcher identifies 'core phenomenon' (Creswell, 2007, p. 64.). In common with other aspects of grounded theory, when core phenomenon emerge the researcher re-visits previous coding to apply emerging core phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In the later stages of research the application of 'selective coding' is undertaken where propositions are established and theories developed (Creswell, 2007, p. 65.). Whilst such categories are being generated the researcher utilizes 'theoretical sampling', returning to appropriate research participants to further probe and develop theoretical categories that emerge, "writing memos... allows the researcher to map out possible sources and sample theoretically" (Birks and Mills, 2011, p. 11.). This on-going process employs a 'constant comparative method' (Glaser and Strauss, 2009), and focuses on the development of emerging theoretical concepts and categories until they are 'theoretically saturated' (Birks and Mills, 2011, p. 10.). Finally more advanced 'refined' memos lead into a process of theory generation. The key to this process seems to lie in the on-going and systematic comparison of data and re-visiting coding, respondents and responses that generate the resultant theoretical concepts.



Subsequent to analysis through this inductive approach theoretical categories that were established were further analysed in relation to literature discussed in the chapters two, three and four. Whilst this is not a 'response' to grounded theory that one might find in some approaches, the literature cited nevertheless formed an important tool to facilitate further analysis. The categories and analytical links established through primary research can be related to relevant literature and this literature can also be analysed from the newly established 'grounded' viewpoint.

Whilst a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis was employed, this is not to say that it does not have its detractors and some notable limitations. These relate to both theoretical and the more practical aspects of the approach.

In theoretical terms a range of problems arise when undertaking grounded theory. Grounded theory is probably the most widely used source for analysis in qualitative social research, and if anything this amplifies the need to provide a robust critique (Thomas and James, 2006). Thomas and James (2006) consider that grounded theory is overtly simplistic in exploring and revealing the "meanings and interrelationships in data" (Thomas and James, 2006, p. 768).). They also suggest that it approaches analysis from the wrong direction by placing an emphasis on 'procedures' before considering 'interpretation' (Thomas and James, 2006). Burgess *et al* (2006) note Bryman's (2001) concerns regarding the practical problems of grounded theory in terms of the excessive time required to transcribe interviews. They also question the extent to which grounded

theory results in new theory, rather than providing concepts. Finally, an issue is raised concerning the fragmentation of data through coding procedures (Bryman, 2001). These issues are noted and will be addressed below.

### **5.10 Research procedures**

Subsequent to the Pilot Study, and through evaluation of the focus group undertaken, the primary research was undertaken. In addition to the Pilot Focus Group a further three focus groups were completed. When choosing the participants for the focus groups I broadly followed the procedures outlined in the Pilot Study. Consequently to reduce a conflict of interests as an 'insider', again a colleague acted as a gatekeeper to select new research participants who had not participated in the pilot stage. Again a purposively selective sample was employed to ensure that participants would be those involved in undertaking their university applications. At the pilot focus group stage all respondents intended to apply to university, for the remaining three focus groups all respondents had applied to university. My colleague, the 'gatekeeper', provided me with a list of names of students who were applying to university and who had expressed an interest in participating in the research. I then systematically worked down the list, inviting students to participate in the focus groups.

In total twenty-nine students were invited to focus groups, but only nineteen participated. These had a broadly equal gender division with nine male respondents and ten female respondents. Given the demographics of the local area and the ethnic make-up of the student body, which almost entirely consists of students from a white ethnic

background, no students participated in the research that belonged to an ethnic minority group. Focus groups lasted for approximately one hour each, were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed.

In addition to the focus groups semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eighteen students. Ten of these respondents had already participated in the focus group stage of the research. They were selected to participate in a semi-structured interview through 'theoretical sampling' undertaken as part of a grounded theory approach to data analysis. These participants had raised important issues that were identified as significant through grounded theory coding. Consequently, they were subsequently interviewed to explore and 'saturate' these issues and to enable and aid further theoretical development. Eight additional students also participated in the semi-structured interviews. They were chosen following the same procedures as the participants for the focus groups. Again, a list was provided by my colleague, the gatekeeper, and the final participants for the research were selected by systematically working down the list. The interview stage of the research continued until both theoretical categories were saturated and, as it was necessary to wholly focus on data analysis. Interview respondents also comprised of a broadly equal gender division with ten female and eight male participants.

Given the social and demographic characteristics of the college the majority of students are located in the lower half of the NS-SEC scheme (Office for National Statistics, 2009), consequently I did not consider that it would be problematic to obtain a sample

for the focus groups and semi-structured interviews, that broadly belonged to lower socio-economic groups, as this would be the majority of students. However, to check on this I recorded their parents' occupational class initially through their occupational background identified on their UCAS form. This confirmed that the prospective participants did indeed belong to broadly lower socio-economic groups and so I then proceeded with the research. During the research, in both the main focus groups and semi-structured interviews, I also confirmed occupational class through utilising a short questionnaire [See Appendix 11.5]. Where respondent's parents' held occupations in different National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) categories, the 'higher' occupation was taken as an indication of occupational class. This did not significantly change the profile of the majority of the sample. However, for two respondents when the 'higher' occupation was taken as an indication of social class it was apparent that they were defined as belonging to higher, or middle-class, socio-economic groups. Both had selected the 'lower' parental occupational group as part of their UCAS application, suggesting that they belonged to a lower socio-economic group. However, the data from the short questionnaire suggested that they belonged to a middle-class group. Nevertheless, as they participated in the research, and for each, as one parent belonged to a lower socio-economic group, I decided to retain them in the sample. Additionally, parental attendance at university was also recorded. In a similar way, as indicated above, it was not necessary to sample on the basis of ethnicity, as the college has ethnic minority participation of less than one per cent. However the sample was selected to maintain a broadly equal gender balance.

To summarise, in total nineteen students participated in the focus groups: nine male and ten female. The semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eighteen students: ten female and eight male. The research as a whole involved the participation of twenty-seven different students. The focus groups and interviews lasted for approximately an hour each. Responses were electronically recorded and later transcribed ready for data analysis.

The practical stages of this approach involved initial, or first cycle, coding of the focus group and interview responses to identify conceptual ideas. Analytic memos were then produced to develop 'tentative' analytic categories (Creswell, 2007). This process then led to further theoretical sampling to further explore analytic categories and enable a constant comparative method until theoretical saturation was achieved. Consequently, where themes were identified during the focus group phase of the research they were further prioritized in terms of questioning in later stages. Students who raised points that seemed particularly significant in terms of the development of analytic categories were then asked to participate in the later interview phase of the research.

## **5.11 Conclusion**

This section has highlighted the research strategy that was employed to address research questions. To establish that way that students employ social and cultural capital and to investigate the impact of social class, an interpretative, although critical, research paradigm was adopted. The research has also employed a qualitative perspective and a grounded theory approach to data analysis. Through adopting such an approach, and

through employing focus groups and semi-structured interviews as research methods, it is hoped that participants' meanings and motivations for behaviour were revealed. Whilst this approach utilises the ideas of Bourdieu to address research questions, grounded theory was specifically employed to allow the participants to explore and explain the meanings for their actions. The next section discusses and analyses these meanings and seeks to further theoretical understanding.



## **6. Key Factors in Higher Education Choice**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The following three chapters examine the findings of the research undertaken and include an analysis and a discussion of emerging themes and theoretical constructs.

### **6.2 Setting the scene: intentions in relation to Higher Education**

#### **Institution (HEI) and general location**

It is worth noting students' intentions in relation to the prestige of the institution and the general location desired, before proceeding to a more detailed analysis. This sets the scene for the patterns that emerge in relation to choice. In terms of prestige it is possible to rank HEIs in a number of ways from overall ranking tables, such as the *Guardian* (Harrison and Addison, 2010) and *The Times* (O'Leary, 2011), subject rankings from similar sources, and in terms of more historically based and more recent university groupings. These link to the historical division between universities and polytechnics which persisted until 1992, and also the post-1992 emergence of mission groups – with the most notable being *The Russell Group* and *The 1994 Group* and independent groupings such as *The Sutton Trust Thirty* (The Sutton Trust, 2011) and *The Sutton Trust Thirteen* (The Sutton Trust, 2008).

To give a broad indication of prestige, I have chosen to define prestige in terms of groupings of universities belonging to the higher status and more prestigious mission



groups (The Russell Group and the 1994 Group) and the pre-1992 universities that generally rank higher in a range of print and online publications (Harrison and Addison, 2010; O'Leary, 2011). It is worth noting however that The Sutton Trust defines prestige in terms of The Russell Group and The Sutton Trust Thirteen (The Sutton Trust, 2008).

From the original twenty-seven participants in the sample, three who participated in the pilot phase decided against applying to enter higher education. From the remaining twenty-four, only six (25%) elected to apply, as a first choice, to a more prestigious institution. Three applied to The Russell Group (two to Southampton and one to Birmingham), two to The 1994 Group (Sussex and Bath) and one to a pre-1992 institution (Bradford).

Insofar as general location is concerned, some other interesting patterns emerge. If one broadly considers applications in terms of moving away or staying local (The eight HEIs within the local vicinity are: The University of Bournemouth, The Arts University College at Bournemouth, The University of Chichester, The University of Portsmouth, Southampton Solent University, The University of Southampton, Winchester School of Art and The University of Winchester), then a fairly equal division emerges with thirteen students wishing to stay local and eleven wishing to move away.

The following analysis provides a rationale for student choices and discusses possible reasons for themes within choice. During the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews concerning university choice two substantial areas were explored:

influences on choice and themes for choice. In terms of influences on choice, a number of significant areas for responses emerged. These included influences from family and broader social networks (parents, siblings, relatives, friends and peers), more institutional sources of influence (school, college, media), and through visiting higher education providers. Themes for choice highlighted different priorities in a range of areas that can be broadly termed locality, institution, course, enjoyment, fitting-in, prestige or ranking, pragmatism and a concern over crime.

When choosing where to study, respondents chose a range of options which all offer a valuable and rewarding university experience. It is not the purpose of this research to make a value judgement on individual choices, but to comment on the influences on choice and the kinds of themes that seem significant. Students identify a range of experiences, which do seem to have some influence on their final choices. These include: parents, college, siblings, other relatives, friends, peers and the media. These in turn link to the themes that students identify as significant, which range from general location to course choice and level of prestige. Whilst a range of influence is exerted, familial influence seems the most significant and can extend or limit choices. It therefore seems apposite to examine the influences that students cite as a starting point for this discussion.

## **6.3 Higher education choice**

### **6.3.1 Parents**

In terms of influence the most significant factor appears to be the family and in particular parents. Most respondents reported some kind of discussion or view from parents although these sometimes differed between mothers and fathers and could be broadly positive or negative. Negative comments, in my terms, may indicate a 'limitation' on choice rather than a desire to prevent participation in higher education. In general most parents are in support of participation in higher education and see that this will provide enhanced opportunities often in terms of employability. They often support or endorse student choices, although this tends to be in relation to general location rather than a specific HEI. Parents of eight respondents are supportive of higher education but are equally in support of employment after college and so do not exert an overtly higher education based agenda. Where parents do provide support this seems quite significant. This is particularly the case where they have attended university themselves (one or both parents of eight respondents) although their higher education experiences were equally likely to be as mature students (one or both parents of four respondents). Parents can also be quite supportive in practical terms. They attend open days and discuss choices in the light of these experiences and offer guidance in terms of student finances. At least half of the respondents noted that although parents are supportive, they lack knowledge of higher education.

## **Themes from parents – location**

### **Staying local**

Parents perhaps most significantly do give their children advice regarding general location and this seems to relate to the places that people consider ‘safe’ and proximity to home. This links to student themes for choice and, one could argue, has a significant influence on final destination. This is apparent where parents exert a ‘limiting’ or ‘negative’ influence in relation to acceptable locality and distance from home. Some do not want their children too far away ‘in case something happens’ and they also link some locations with high rates of crime. Whilst both mothers and fathers can have a limiting or restrictive influence, fathers seem to be more direct in what they say. They also express concerns over costs, such as accommodation, that again can be linked to location. Where parents express concerns over location, these concerns do not seem to be mitigated by other factors such as academic standing or relative chances of employability after graduation.

Roughly half the students in the sample desired to stay in the local area. In relation to their parents some appear to be fairly overt in pointing to favoured local choices. Megan is a good example of this. According to Megan, her father is not very concerned about location, but her mother wants her to stay at home. “She doesn’t want me to move away to be honest...she hates the thought of me not being at home”. Part of her reasoning links to Megan keeping horses. On several occasions she alludes to this and in her view this remains a key reason for her mother being against a move away from home. Gary’s parents, like several others, are less overt, but still in favour of him attending a local

HEI. He reports general support for a range of options he has considered. However he is certain that his parents were against a move. "I think if they could have they would have got me to stay at home and not gone to...university". Whilst they did not make comments against particular HEIs, Gary nevertheless feels that they raised other issues about choices further afield, "they say it's expensive to rent the halls and pay for the food". Other students, such as Ryan, Scott and Neil, also point to the importance of relative local proximity. Ryan acknowledges that his parents have influenced him and considers that he "wouldn't want to be too far away". Scott considered moving away, with options at Keele University and Oxford Brookes, but elected to attend Winchester. He reflects on his decision: "It kind of made me think, well if I do stay closer I will still have my family, which is important to me". The influence of family can clearly be implicit. Scott's mother did not try and counsel against a move away, but he notes, "I could tell she really wanted me to go to Winchester...she was having a bit of a crisis...it was quite obvious what she wanted".

Other students who elected to stay at local HEIs do not explicitly point to parental influence in terms of location. Callum suggests a lack of interest, "they're not that fussed", whilst Sophie and Jess's parents appear to have been supportive of any choices. However one respondent reports a particularly restrictive influence. Gemma's father has a strong influence that does impose limitations on choice. She reports that he has told her that she cannot move away from home, "I was lumbered with what I had in the general area". Although she proposed choices further away (including Aberdeen – admittedly to gain a reaction!), her father did not move his position. "He wouldn't let up,

so in the end I had to cave". Gemma is quite critical of her father viewing him as 'controlling': "he has to have women controlled". Although other family members have supported some of her suggested choices, it would appear that her father's influence is overriding. However, despite this view she makes it clear that ultimately she does not want to go against her father's wishes.

### **Moving away from home**

The majority of parents are supportive of higher education choices in some way. However, parents who seem to have a more proactive involvement in educational choice and believed in the importance of higher education seem broadly to be in support of a wider range of locations and often travel to open days or campus visits with their children. This also seems to link to an understanding or recognition of some of the broad benefits of higher education. Alice is a good example. Her mother, who is a graduate, encouraged university visits and clearly indicated to Alice that prestige or ranking are important in university choice. Her mother also had distinctive ideas about institutions that should be avoided: "she was funny about Polytechnics". Alice notes that ranking was important in their discussions, as were the facilities available. Alice's mother also accompanied her on seven or eight university visits to a broad range of locations: "she made comments...she wrote things down...on the drive back we'd talk". Alice notes that her mother was very positive about more culturally diverse urban locations such as Brunel University, London. According to Alice she liked it "because it was really multi-cultural like me, and she said she could see me fitting in there...she's 'oh look there's loads of different types of food' and ' they do loads of different types of festivals'".

Kate is another student who considers her mother was more proactive than her father. Her mother, who is not a graduate, initially had concerns about participation in higher education, as she was concerned about finance. Her initial view linked to attending university locally. However, after exploring funding options, her mother changed her position. Subsequently, Kate had a “major discussion” with her mother that she considers was a “turning point”, “it’s like a complete turnaround”. According to Kate, understanding the procedures and funding arrangements for university have dispelled financial myths and given her the opportunity and the support from her mother to travel to an HEI further away – in this case The University of Birmingham.

Vicky, who has decided to go to The University of Sussex, suggests that her mother did encourage her to move a reasonable distance away: “she wanted us [Vicky and her siblings to be] far enough away that we didn’t come home every weekend...she wanted us to spread our wings and fly the nest, but not too far away that we were uncomfortable”. Vicky points to her mother’s frustration at being unable to move away to undertake her degree whilst a mature student: “she had four kids, she couldn’t move away and have a normal student life”. It seems clear that Vicky, and her mother, consider that moving away is an integral part of the university experience. Vicky reports her mother’s encouragement to visit and consider all her Higher Education (HE) choices, including Essex and Bristol. She also points to positive encouragement from her father, noting, “my dad’s been more supportive implicitly”.

Other respondents, although not as emphatically, also point to positive encouragement for a broad range of locations. Emily, who intends to go to Brighton University, is certain that her parents support a range of areas, although she maintains that “they don’t really know much about universities but...got an impression of the area [Brighton]”. Her parents support the general location of Brighton and their approval seems to extend her options. Despite a few caveats, Beth, who wishes to attend the University of the West of England, reports that her mother said, “you can pick wherever you want to go”.

Excluding one student (Pete) the respondents who favour moving away from the local area tend to choose institutions within the southern half of England. This extends as far as Nottingham Trent University in the north, to The University of Plymouth in the west and the two universities at Brighton (The University of Brighton and The University of Sussex) to the east. It would seem from respondents’ comments that, whilst parents have supported wider choices, they nevertheless see some HEIs as too remote. Matt is a good example here. He notes that his parents support a range of choices, but “didn’t want me to go too far away...my mum doesn’t like the idea of me being...up in the highlands”. Pete points to similar concerns, “[my parents] would prefer it if I wasn’t too far away for travel”.

### **Concerns about crime rates**

Respondents also point to quite specific concerns that their parents have raised concerning crime rates. These concerns do not link to any specific HEIs, but are raised in connection with certain, often inner city, locations. These are linked to both



respondents who wish to remain local and those with more of a desire to travel outside of the local area. However for students who wish to remain local a concern with crime 'might' be a motivation to stay local, whereas where students are considering broader choices, such concerns 'might' exclude individual or smaller clusters of HEIs. In terms of students who intend to stay in the local area a number report parents with concerns about crime. Ryan falls into this category and indicates that he discussed crime and general location with his parents. However, it was not so much that he avoided locations with high crime rates, but instead he was drawn to the institutions that rate highly for "student life and safety" such as Chichester. Gary is also intending to attend Chichester and points to his parents' relief that he's chosen a location with "not a massive amount of crime and cost". Megan also points to her father being concerned about crime if she chooses Portsmouth. Whilst Harriet claims her father had expressed concerns, suggesting she should avoid South East London. She does not see this as a limitation, but notes, "I think that's [crime] the only thing he disputed".

In relation to students who wish to move outside of the local area, some indicate parental concerns over crime. Emily points to her concerns, "I actually and my parents are much more comfortable about me going somewhere that is known to be less dangerous, especially with my parents, because I am a young girl...I think they are quite worried about that". Whilst Emily has a perception that her parents are worried about crime, and 'may' modify her choices accordingly, Matt's parents are quite explicit. Matt points to his father saying: "Oh no, you don't want to be going to the Liverpool University because the area around it is very rough...you'd probably get mugged". Matt

acknowledged that his father has a point, but considers that you find criminality everywhere. Henry also suggests concerns about crime, but this is not linked to any particular location. Vicky and Alice share similar perceptions. Vicky points to her mother's concerns over crime in London: "it's the capital, it's got higher crime rates, she'd be worried about us getting into trouble", whereas Alice is sure that her parents have concerns over both London and Glasgow. She thinks, "they wouldn't feel safe" if she studied there. Alice thinks that her mother links Glasgow to a family friend with drug and mental health problems.

Kate whose parents, particularly her father, had concerns about crime, said "I think he was a bit worried about crime" specifically if she opted for her primary choice at The University of Birmingham. However this links to broader concerns initially expressed by her parents as noted above. She reports that her parents were initially against her choice, "I dragged them there" for the Open Day. However they changed their position, "my dad literally turned to me and said, 'I didn't want to like this uni, but it's actually really nice'". Kate had also considered the issue of crime, she concluded that, "living at the uni...it's different...I'll be at Birmingham uni but not necessarily in the middle of Birmingham where there's all the crime and stuff". In terms of parental influence a further axis seems to arise linked to gender.

### **Mothers and fathers – 'It's different for girls'**

Mothers seem to support higher education decisions more than fathers: particularly in relation to their daughters. Mothers seem to emphasise the importance of higher

education as a mechanism for enabling a career particularly in relation to their daughters. Vicky's mother is a good example. She seems to exert a significant influence over Vicky, as she has "always told us to go to university". She has completed a degree subsequent to an Access course as a mature student and she wants better for her daughters. Vicky clearly sees gender as an important issue in her mother's perspective. "I think that's because she's got three girls, because it's different for girls than it is for boys to get a good job without education". According to Vicky her mother has a perspective that views employment chances as more difficult for girls if they don't get high levels of education, in comparison to boys and in her case her younger brother. Vicky's mother thinks she should move away because that's what her sister did as that way she'll have more opportunities. Her mother wants her to enjoy herself. This contrasts with her own experiences bringing up four children and completing a degree as a mature student. Whilst Vicky's father is also positive about her educational opportunities he does not seem to have the same emphasis on importance. Vicky again sees this in terms of gender, "I don't think he understands from our point of view [as women] how important it is to go to university". Whilst her father is supportive, it is her mother who influences her and emphasises the importance of women gaining an education. Vicky's father values education, but appears to lack the empathy to view from a female perspective. Through adopting a position that links to opportunity, a position that is directly driven by gender and differential gender opportunities, Vicky's mother encourages or endorses a broad range of choice in terms of locality and through supporting breadth allows Vicky to ultimately select a high status university: Sussex.

Kate's mother has been supportive in a similar way. Kate notes that once her mother was aware of her potential she quickly realised that education could facilitate a life changing experience. Again, like Vicky, this is a gendered situation. Kate thinks her mother sees this as an escape from some of the options open to young women – the situation where her mother was, “stuck with... being a single mum”. Instead, “she sees going to university... as a way of not to end-up... where she ended-up”. However Kate does feel pressure from being in this situation.

Fiona has different circumstances. Her parents are separated and she lives with her father, but has a similar experience to Vicky and Kate. However in her case it is her father who drives her and has given her “no choice”. She has to attend university. She notes that “he doesn't want me to have the life that he had”. In common with Kate's mother, she reports that he has no real knowledge of higher education, and has not been able to advise in terms of choice. However nor has he limited her choices. Instead he attended open days with Fiona, and like Alice's mother, discussed their mutual experiences of the visits. Sophie also had the same experience. She also discovered that her mother could bring a different perspective to the visit. Sophie notes that her mother was more rational when assessing institutions; “she kept a level head”. Her mother did have a view that she should avoid a “bad university”, and was attracted to universities that “have a spark”. However Sophie, like Kate, was influenced to some extent by her subject teachers.

Male respondents also receive support for higher education from their parents in general terms, but they do not report that this support is significant. Ben notes that his parents support him, but suggests that they will be happy with any outcome: “I could be a road-sweeper if I wanted to”. Joe and Liam are in the same situation: their parents are supportive, but supportive of any outcomes. Henry and Gary have parents that support them, and help them with practical advice, such as finance, but beyond this their parents appear to have little impact.

Parental attitudes in relation to their children attending higher education and the consequent potential influence of these attitudes range from very open and supportive for respondents such as Vicky, Alice and Kate, to significantly limiting in the case of Gemma. In relation to the male respondents, whilst parents remain supportive they are also often neutral, as in the case of Matt, Joe and Liam, as other career options are also valued. Therefore one can also differentiate across the range of parental behaviour between positive responses and often proactive responses that genuinely encourage choice, those that are ‘merely’ supportive – or neutral, and those that impose severe limitations. Whilst most parents are broadly supportive in some way the latter two responses can close down options when being negative about locations due to factors such as distance and crime rates. I will term these ‘limiting strategies’, whereas the former approaches could be more broadly termed ‘enabling strategies’. A similar idea has been proposed by Fuller and Unwin (2003), who point to an *expansive restrictive continuum* when examining apprenticeships. In relating this to my research, parents who

present ‘limiting strategies’ fall towards the restrictive end of the continuum, whilst the converse is true of families who present ‘enabling strategies’ and so who are expansive.

### **6.3.2 College**

One of the key research questions sought to examine the extent to which institutional practices influenced student choice and, possibly by implication, the acquisition and utilisation of cultural capital. What has been quite surprising, as a practitioner, is the limited impact that the college seems to exert in terms of informing choice. Acknowledging this, the college does have some impact or influence through teachers, tutors and student support services, but this is inequitable.

In terms of teacher support, respondents have mixed reactions, although again it is the lack of input or recognition of support that is most revealing. Scott reports that teachers suggested he considered “bigger cities”, although he says that he ignored this. He also points to a more indirect influence. Whilst he originally intended to pursue Business at university, because he didn’t like the subject teachers at college he changed his options to the social sciences. Paige points to some subject advice from teachers about her Photography course, “so that influenced the choices I made...even out of the final five...they were more positive about Winchester”. Fiona also considers that her subject teachers helped, as does Alice, although this was only in terms of advising on grades. Sophie is more vocal about the support she received, although this was quite general and linked to finance, “it made me...sit back and think logically about where I am at the moment and where I could be or where I could get”. Whilst Emily is the most emphatic,

“yes, I probably wouldn’t be going if I didn’t come to Middlehurst College”. However, she does not feel that the college has influenced choice in terms of location, but it has influenced subject choice, “my subject choice, Sociology, definitely because that is what I have done at college and that is what I have enjoyed”. So, she links her progression to her subject teachers. Henry makes a similar point, claiming the former Head of Psychology who discussed ranking and grades with him, influenced him. However, in general, teachers have fairly limited impact on respondents.

In terms of support from Personal Tutors, respondents also report both positive and negative interactions and it would appear that support is sporadic at best. Some students do receive positive support and Sophie reports that her tutor, “did have some influence”, and helped her in “deciphering what [the course] meant”. Her tutor also had an influence on specific HEIs, making some recommendations, but also for “a couple of universities she sort of went ‘maybe not’”. Sophie cites the University of Kent, Medway Campus, as an example. She notes that her tutor, “just wanted the best for us”. Jess, who has the same tutor, also points to receiving a lot of help, “and that really did influence me”. She talked through her choices with her: “I think once talking to people like Nicola, it helped me make my decisions definitely”. Vicky has been in two tutor groups at college. She notes that her second tutor pointed to the prestige of some choices and gave her advice “on how easier it would be to go to a better uni and make it easier later in life”. Neil also had a positive experience in terms of support and his tutor: “he was like my parents again...making sure I’d thought everything through”. However, this did not include advice on which HEI to choose. Scott did receive direct advice from his tutor: “she tried

to put me off Winchester”, but he ignored her. Ryan and Gary also point to some direct and pragmatic advice from their tutors in terms of the grades they could achieve and institutions subsequently available. Gary was told that Exeter was “too tough”.

Other respondents report more neutral or negative experiences. Vicky, this time when commenting on support from her first tutor, points to a lack of support: “they weren’t particularly helpful...they didn’t really want to know. Fiona presents a similar view claiming her tutor, “doesn’t seem to know what’s going on...I wouldn’t go to him now if I needed help”. She also points to her tutor mocking her choices, “he was taking the Mickey and being a bit like, ‘why would you want to go there’”? Megan has a similar view, “I don’t have a very good tutor...I don’t really fit-in”. Megan feels this is because her tutor does not teach the subject she wishes to study. Other respondents note no influence. Beth suggests she received “nothing” from her tutor, whilst Alice claims “she just...left us to look at them [prospectuses] and then make our mind-up”. Gemma is similar: “she left me to my own devices”.

The college’s Student Support Team provides the third area of support that could potentially impact on HEI choice. Respondents again report some general support, but also advice that they did not find useful. Matt found that student services gave him quite a lot of information about subjects he is intending to pursue. This did not link to choice however. Gemma also received some general support, although not on choice, “they give you a little stepping stone”. Kate found student support more demanding, “it’s a bit ...scary”, as a lot of help was offered. This seems to have been linked to her role as a



'student ambassador', a role also administered by the student support team. Megan reports the same, suggesting she received additional access to information regarding open days and summer schools as a result of the 'ambassador role' – this might point to inequalities in resources.

Other students are more negative about 'student support'. Harriet reports being told that teaching would reduce her options, "even though that was what I really wanted to do...that put me off doing it". She also indicates that she felt helpless, "if she wasn't going to help me then I didn't know who else to talk to". Alice reports similar concerns when talking to Student Services. She initially wanted to study Psychiatry, but claims that she was told she couldn't because she "needed medicine". Then she applied for Psychology, but suggests that she was again told by the student support manager, "no one is going to want you to help them because you stink of smoke and unless you quit you won't get anywhere because no one will want you to help them". She suggests of the support manager "she's not very friendly...[she says]... 'oh, you can't do that'". She implies that she would not return to student support for further advice.

One influence, supported by student services, the *Aim Higher* programme, has been considered as important by a number of respondents. This initiative supports a range of programmes, but primarily has been significant to Middlehurst students in facilitating university summer schools. Gemma describes it as "fun", but "not" an influence on choice. Megan thought it was "brilliant" and claims, "I got really excited about university", however, again, this does not help with course choice, "it's so hard to pick".

Whereas where Matt attended an Aim Higher event at Southampton, he was impressed, but couldn't apply to this HEI because of the high grades required.

The picture that emerges does not give a great deal of support to the view that college can influence or support choices. Individual teachers and tutors can have an impact, but this can be beneficial or detrimental. Support services, likewise, have a limited effect as, like teachers and tutors, their approach can be interpreted in the same way. So in general, any college influence is limited and where it can have an impact it is inconsistent or arguably inequitable. Where broader initiatives have an effect, such as *Aim Higher*, this appears to support general progress to university rather than any specific choices.

### **6.3.3 Siblings**

From the pilot stage of the research onwards five or six students pointed to the influence of siblings. This in particular seems to have made more of an impression on female students. Vicky is a student who feels that her sister's experiences at Sussex University had a profound influence on her. When her sister moved, she reports, "[she] had the best year of her life...it made her a different person". Vicky has visited her sister and concludes, "she...absolutely loves it, always comes back with good stories to tell how nice it is, how much she's enjoying it...more than likely I'll be happy there as well". Vicky has also chosen Sussex as her firm choice. She links the university to a cosmopolitan view; "we're more likely to mix with better than we are, people from London, where it's a big city". Her sister also enjoys the experience in Vicky's view

because, “rather than going to the city and turning into a big, flash, glamour person, she’s not, she’s completely grounded and enjoys it there”. Vicky points to her sister being, “a big influence”. She didn’t attend open days with her as “she wanted me to come to my own conclusions”. However, Vicky reports that her sister was against some HEIs: “when I told her I applied to Portsmouth she sort of scoffed and laughed...[she said]...it’s too close to home, it’s not good enough, you know you can do better, you know you can get to a better uni”. Further, Vicky notes that her sister said, “I should look for the higher end of the scale because I can get the grades”. Finally, Vicky concludes, “I don’t know whether I would have even looked at Brighton or Sussex if my sister didn’t go there, unless I’d looked at the league tables and found that out”. Fiona also had a sibling, her brother, at The University of Bristol. She claims that he did not really enjoy his experience, although he encouraged her to attend.

Other female respondents also report influence from their sisters, although in a less direct way, and according to respondents because of the more ‘negative’ experiences of their sisters. In these circumstances the ‘non-graduate’ experiences of their sisters worked as a catalyst for change. Kate considers that her older sister ‘failed’, “[she] ended-up working in a shop and stuff”. Also her sister completed an apprenticeship and in Kate’s view, “didn’t have a life”. These experiences prompted Kate in her aims, “seeing her not going...[made me]...even more sure I wanna go”. According to Kate her sister has also encouraged her to, “move away, move out of home, have a good time, go and have fun whilst getting a degree”, although she does not seem to have influenced location or HEI. Megan reports similar reasons for her motivation linking this to both

her sister and her cousin. She points to her cousin being pregnant at nineteen, “so everyone’s expectations of her went out of the window...[and]...all the pressure came on me”. She feels as if she should “carry on the family name as it should be”. Megan’s sister has also encouraged her to go to university – Megan points to her sister, “hating” her career as a hairdresser implying that Megan will be happier in the future if she undertakes higher education. Gemma also reports that her sister, who had intended to undertake higher education, became pregnant and over the years has, “lost her vision”. However, she pushed Gemma who considers that, “the burden falls on me...they’re all telling me to go to uni”. Finally Jess, although not thinking that her sister influenced her, commented that she dropped out of college, disappointing her parents. She explains, “it made me want to try harder to please them”. Other students also point to general encouragement from their siblings. It would appear that in all these ‘negative’ cases, female students feel encouraged or pressured to go to university, but this does not impact on the choice of university. What they have done is reject the routes their siblings took.

In terms of the male respondents, siblings in general appear to have less of an influence, although Scott notes some significance. He was influenced in relation to prestige and ranking when talking to his sister and her boyfriend. Neil notes that two of his brothers have been to university, but does not point to any real significance.

### **6.3.4 Relatives**

In terms of relatives, few students report influence, however when they do they might indicate significance. Emily points to her cousin who went to Sussex University. She

does not think that her cousin directly influenced her, but through visiting, “I just like the area”. Pete has cousins that went to Southampton University who he describes as “really academic”. They have not influenced his choice, but he suggests, “I want to prove to my grandparents that I’m up to the same standard as my cousins...I want to make them proud”. He also points to witnessing their experiences in a positive light, “seeing that they were at university and enjoying it...made me want to...change my mind [and go]”. Fiona also points to a cousin encouraging HE participation, whilst Ryan notes that his grandparents “would never let me move too far out”.

### **6.3.5 Friends and peers**

Respondents do report some influences from friends or broader peers. In some cases friends are going through the same process of choice, and simply offer “moral support”. As Ryan notes, “you don’t feel so much on your own”. Friends can also positively reinforce choices according to Alice. Megan takes this further in terms of support, “when we were making our choices we helped each other...we were like, ‘oh, that one is really good’”. She considers that often prestige is a, “word of mouth sort of thing”. Some respondents also found that their friends had quite clear views on one or two local HEIs. Matt reports that his friends made jokes about Southampton Solent University, and Paige reflects this, “they’d be like, ‘oh no, you can do better than that’”. She also notes, “it probably did make a difference”, and claims she avoided Solent on the basis of “reputation and what your friends say”. Sophie also reports negative comments, but these are concerning The University of Portsmouth and she rationalises this in terms of local rivalry. However, Sophie maintains that she is comfortable with Portsmouth and,

“so it didn’t really bother me much”. Emily claims that friends are “not really an influence”, whilst Callum is influenced, but by friends who are already attending university, so comments are about their own HEIs.

On a slightly different vein, some respondents discuss the importance of the proximity of friends to their chosen HEI. Fiona thought this was an advantage, as did Scott, but they were not that concerned if friends were not on their doorstep.

### **6.3.6 Media**

Areas that have less significance include the mass media. Whilst Ryan made extensive use of Internet resources and social networking to gain a perspective on HEIs, he was in a clear minority. In terms of the media he “had a few conversations” with other prospective students, “the ice is broken basically”. He also looked at league tables online. However the majority of respondents do not cite these kinds of examples.

However, I feel that my findings relating to the mass media were constrained by my approach to questioning. Whilst I explored direct media influence in specifically concerning HE, I did not extend this to the way that a much broader range of media might influence respondents. For example, Vicky points to a quite negative view of Essex that she links to a recent portrayal in the media. Whilst this did not concern The University of Essex, it might nevertheless have helped to formulate her general view of

this area. This is quite significant in the context of the importance of location in general and is an area that deserved more coverage.

## **6.4 Conclusion**

The key findings presented point to a situation where the main influence or driver for those applying to HE is the immediate family. This is also related to gender and often linked to relationships between mothers and their daughters. What is also surprising is the apparent lack of influence from peers or institutional impact from the college. The resultant themes for choice, primarily linked to locality, are discussed in the next chapter.

## **7. Key Themes and Concepts in Higher Education Choice**

### **7.1 Introduction**

Clearly students are subject to a range of factors that influence choice in a complex way and it may not be possible to suggest that one overriding factor links to a theme or themes for choice. However, it is reasonable to suggest that influences on choice do inevitably have a bearing on final outcomes, and at this point it is worth considering the extent to which themes for choice so far can be traced back to influences for choice. Therefore at this stage themes for choice in terms of location require attention.

Students who participated in the focus groups identify a range of factors that can influence where they choose to study; these can be broadly termed locality, institution, course, enjoyment, fitting-in, prestige or ranking, pragmatism and a concern over crime. The most significant factor in terms of selection would appear to be general location. Students, who wish to remain in the local area, so that they can commute from home or retain close proximity to family and friends, realistically have a choice of eight institutions. This limits the range of courses and options available, but also provides a limitation in terms of prestige or ranking. In terms of ranking the only real choice of a prestigious institution is the University of Southampton: a member of the Russell Group and an institution that regularly ranks amongst the top twenty universities (O'Leary, 2011). Consequently a choice in terms of locality can be very limiting as this narrows



choice not only to the few local institutions but also in terms of the possibility of attending a prestigious institution.

In this sense, students are quite polarised in terms of their range of choices. There are 24 students from the sample of both focus group participants and those who participated in interviews who still hope to attend higher education: twelve male and twelve female. Thirteen of these participants have elected to remain in the local area, whilst eleven have elected to move away. Only two of the participants who will remain in the local area have chosen The University of Southampton (including The Winchester School of Art). In terms of those choosing to move out of the local area, and hence gain access to a much broader range of choices, three have chosen (and gained places) at prestigious universities, Birmingham (Russell Group), Bath (1994 Group) and Sussex (1994 Group) whilst one has chosen and gained a place at a pre-1992 University (Bradford).

This again raises the question of how the respondents decided to 'stay local' or 'move away'. In terms of locality a range of factors or sub-themes are identified that seem to illustrate why students make their choices.

## **7.2 'A love of the local'**

Students who wish to remain in the general area cite a number of reasons for their choices. Sometimes they wish to stay home to save money (Leah), although the majority who remain local also wish to move out of their family home to get the 'university experience' (Megan, Scott, Sophie, Gary). Nevertheless the local area has attractions as

it is 'convenient' and for many 'familiarity' seems important. Others are not so much drawn to the local, but are uncomfortable with the prospect of moving too far away (Thomas and James). Here a concern or fear is raised of moving to a metropolitan community where they will experience a 'chaotic' and costly environment. In contrast the benefits of staying local link to a sense of provincialism: a quiet environment where there is countryside, local amenities and familiarity. Consequently a range of push and pull factors emerge. It is also worth noting that a number of students, who have strong reasons for staying local, did consider moving further afield (Scott, Sophie, Jess). In the sample, with the exception of Gemma, all respondents wish to move away from home. Gemma has little choice; she reports that her father has insisted that she remains local.

Ryan is a student who has applied to university away from home (Heythrop College, The University of London), but in his final choices clearly came to prioritise staying local. He seems concerned to stay in reasonable proximity to home, "I wanted to move out but not too far away...to be in reaching distance from home". He has decided to go to Chichester University as opposed to London, "I just can't picture myself in a big city really", and also The University of Chester is "too far away". However he wants some distance from home, choosing his immediate locale is too close, it would, "feel a bit like school". However Ryan does want a "nice community...a nice sort of feel". Gary also reflects a desire to stay relatively local, and for similar sounding reasons, "I just think I prefer a more relaxed environment where you're more likely to see familiar people". He also expressed concerns about "inner city places". Megan also wishes to stay local so that she is able to look after her horses, although she was prepared to look at The

University of Bath. Paige also “never really wanted to move away that far...maybe it’s family and friends back here”. Jess is the same, “I don’t want to be too far away...I am quite family-oriented”.

Neil is more emphatic; he wants to stay local because, “it’s easier than going miles away where you’re not going to see anyone...like friends and family”. He points to the importance of familiarity. Staying local means, “I know my way around...if I was going somewhere far away I’d probably be a bit intimidated”. Finally, Scott, who did consider moving out of the area, elects to stay local. As indicated above, Scott has realised that he wants to be near his family, however he sees the benefit in remaining close to his current local employment, “I have to work when I go” and local work is guaranteed.

### **7.3 ‘The pleasure of independence’**

For some respondents, moving away is the most significant factor in choice although not always in terms of institution, but again in terms of more general geographical location. Social life is a factor in this equation and if this is not present then the university may be rejected. Moving away is linked to independence and enjoyment, and is seen by some as an integral part of the university experience. Those who support this view, such as Vicky and Kate, do not link choice to cost. The way that choice links to the experience of university overrides cost. This possibly links to familial influence. For some respondents any fear of moving away is mitigated by an extended family member living near the proposed choice. For others moving away is important, “but not too far”. They desire independence and self-sufficiency, but wish to retain a reasonable proximity to home.

Part of moving away may be linked to prestige for Vicky and Kate: however this is not the whole picture.

Pete is a student who clearly wants to move away and is the only respondent who is prepared to move to the north of England, “I would probably want to go to a city...I want to be relatively far away from home...I don’t want to stay local”. Pete discusses the importance of independence and sees few problems with moving to the north. Two of his choices are Liverpool and Sheffield, “you can drive it in a day...it’s not far at all”. Alice is another student who is prepared to travel a reasonable distance and sees general location as important as HEI, “I wouldn’t want to go to a university that hasn’t really got a town to go out into because then you’re stuck on a campus pretty much all the time”. She also links moving away to “the experience”.

A further group of students wish to move away, but restrict themselves in relation to distance. Beth is typical of this group. Her firm Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) choice is The University of the West of England, “It was quite important to get far enough away that I’m not going to come home every week, but not too far away, so that there’s a problem then I can easily get back”. Emily is also drawn to moving away to a city and hopes to study in Brighton, “I like the way of life down there, I like all the shops and the little beach and the nightlife”. Emily likes the fact that, “there’s a lot going on”. She also wants independence, “I think it will be good for me to grow-up a little bit”. However, she does note that the Higher Education Institution (HEI) is also as important as the area. Emily is quite clear that some locations are too far,

citing, “Manchester, Liverpool, and all those northern places”. She adds, “I don’t think I would feel comfortable in an area that I’m not really used to...I think I would feel a bit on edge”. Emily also links a northern location to her potential academic performance, “I suppose that I would feel uncomfortable and unhappy there and I wouldn’t do as well as I probably could somewhere else”. Matt also thinks it is important to move away from home as a transition, but considers London, “so busy...and quite expensive as well”.

For Vicky, both institution and location seem important, although location seems to have primacy. Vicky links choosing Brighton, and The University of Sussex to a cosmopolitan experience, “it’s got a broader range of people down in Sussex and Brighton. It’s obviously quite a diverse scene”. Vicky also gives primacy to choice of HEI over choice of subject, ‘the universities I applied for, they were quite good for their subjects and the results, but it was more the university than the subject’. She points to a consideration of a combination of factors: location, distance from home and academic standing. She did however decline to choose HEIs in larger cities, “I’ve never wanted to move to a city”. Kate has a different approach and her final reasons for choice link to HEI, which is not typical of most of the students. However general location also has an impact in relation to HEIs she excluded. She was against the idea of Royal Holloway College, London, because of its proximity to a busy city. She thought there would be, “too much going on...then you would maybe draw away from the experience of being at the university”.

Finally, Fiona raises some interesting comments about location. In broad terms she is happy to travel quite a long distance (but not as far as “Cumbria”) for university. She links her current local area to, “narrow-minded people” and sees that moving will give, “new experiences...it’s about going out and trying different things and meeting new people”. Some of the attitudes of her peers in the local community seem to have frustrated her. She states:

I’ve encouraged some of my friends to go further afield because I think once they get out there and they realise that this isn’t what life is like everywhere, that there are people around that they’re going to be so much happier and they’re going to be so much more open-minded.

However, Fiona also raises some quite revealing comments about location in terms of a fear of provincialism. This will now be discussed.

#### **7.4 “I’m going to be stuck in fields” – ‘A fear of the provincial’**

It is interesting to note that whilst some respondents wish to move away, they also wish to avoid a sense of provincialism in another locale. Moving to an area or institution that might largely attract regional students is a risk as far as Fiona is concerned. She wishes to move away from the area and meet a broad range of people as part of the university experience. Her fear links to being excluded from a local community. Consequently her choices link to bigger, and where feasible, more prestigious institutions that will attract a more cosmopolitan student body. She sees this as ‘less risky’. In a similar way, “rural”,

“local” and “small” institutions are identified as risky by other respondents (Scott, Emily) who, “don’t want to end up in someone else’s back yard” where they might not fit in. The risk links to possible isolation through a particular perception of more rural settings. This does lead to a rejection by some respondents of more prestigious institutions, such as The University of Essex and The University of Kent. This is not only a concern for those wishing to move away from the area, but appears to be a general concern regardless of general preferred location. Consequently this section considers both ‘a fear of the provincial’ and ‘a fear of the rural’.

Respondents do seem to have particular concerns about rural locations as these present the risk of “isolation”. This is a relative measure, however a clear concern. Scott expresses particular worries about rural locations. He has chosen Winchester, which although in a semi-rural setting, “was one of the most modern universities I’ve ever seen”. Scott rejected the arguably more prestigious Keele University because of its rural setting. He felt it was, “really isolated... [and]...literally I felt like I’d gone back to the middle ages”. Part of Scott’s concerns link to a lack of familiarity with this type of campus university: “it definitely wouldn’t feel like anything I was used to...there wasn’t that much to do, there was only one [student] union”. Scott also expressed particularly strong views about Keele’s accommodation, “Keele was literally like cottages, and I felt like I was going to walk in and everyone would be cooking pies...rather than going out and having fun”. Other respondents reflect similar concerns: Paige points to avoiding being, “in the middle of a field...with nothing”, whilst Harriet wishes to avoid HEIs, “that sounded dead boring...as well as...associated with the countryside”. She points to

“Essex and Canterbury” as examples and assumes they will have, “nothing there”. Alice is another respondent who raises concerns about Canterbury (and the University of Kent Campus). She explains her position, “my Nan told me, because she grew up there, she told me it was full of hop fields...I thought, ‘oh flipping heck, I’m not going to be able to do anything. I’m going to be stuck in fields’”.

Jess, Beth, Sophie, Emily and Callum are also concerned about a rural location. They have grown up in a small city and point to preferring an urban lifestyle. Jess links such a preference to familiarity, “I have never been around the countryside, I live in a busy town... you have got everything around you that you need”. Beth is in agreement and would, “rather be near a city”. Sophie does not think that rural or urban is the “main issue”, however she does nevertheless have a view, “I don’t feel as comfortable in rural situations as I do in the city ones because I’m used to the city, so I get the pace of it”. Emily dislikes rural locations for being “too quiet” and is avoiding, “little towns and not much nightlife”. Callum articulates a broader concern in terms of isolation. He points to Bangor University as an example, “I thought, that’s just like a little town. I mean the only people I would see would be people that went to my university”.

Respondents seem to reject *the rural* for a number of reasons. These include concerns over isolation, a lack of social life or a fear over fitting-in or being comfortable. Whilst these are real concerns for the respondents I would also point to a *perception* concerning what is rural. In general *the provincial* is seen as rural and students reject locations such as Canterbury, Keele, Kent and Essex, although these appear to be no more rural than



many options they select but have more familiarity with, such as Chichester and Winchester. Nevertheless, the issue of perception could be significant as it results in students imposing limitations on themselves through applying the *too rural* label. I will suggest below that possible misconceptions regarding some of the HEIs links to a broader issue of *locational capital*.

In addition to concerns over *the rural*, one student, Fiona, introduces an interesting dynamic that links to a notion of moving to *someone else's back yard*. This view suggests that small or rural HEIs could be too risky. They could be linked to a fear of “not fitting-in” and being “cut-off”. Fiona suggests that the larger HEIs are “less risky” because they will attract a broad range of students from diverse locations and more cosmopolitan backgrounds, “if you’re going to a really prestigious university...Bristol [for example], people from all over the country and all over the world come to stay there...there’s going to be more people to fit in with”. Hence large and prestigious HEIs reduce the risk of isolation, whereas a small (local) HEI can amplify isolation. Fiona has concerns about one of her choices, University Campus Suffolk, as she links this institution with a high percentage of local students. She considers that because people will have an established network of friendships one could feel cut-off, “you’re never going to be able to get in there and be really close friends”, and so she feels that she may not be accepted, “it’s going to be harder to just click, like fit-in with people”. It is interesting to note that Fiona is broadly against remaining in her locale, as she would not be able to attain an offer from the most prestigious institution, as she links other local HEIs and staying in the local area with “narrow-minded” people. It would seem that her

concern over moving to a fairly small HEI in a rural location links to a concern that she will be amongst similar “narrow-minded” individuals in another location and additionally will be an outsider as they will have clearly established “friendship groups”. *The fear of the provincial* is diminished through choosing more cosmopolitan locations. Fiona is able to countenance bigger, and cosmopolitan options as she has a good degree of *locational capital*, “we’ve always gone on holiday to different places...gone abroad and...I’ve always had new experiences”. She also grew-up away in another area, Bath, and feels that this has prepared her for the high degree of middle-class participants at university, “Bath [is more] a middle class area than say around here, so I think that the people that I was brought up with are more like the people I’m going to meet at university”.

## **7.5 Prestige and ranking**

It is noteworthy that respondents’ foreground reasons for choice that often exclude the prestige or ranking of a given HEI. Respondents do give prestige some credence, but often foreground other factors, such as general location. From responses one could suggest that respondents fall into three categories in relation to prestige: those for whom prestige is not an issue, those who consider prestige but display limited knowledge of ranking, and those for whom prestige is more important. In any event the majority of students do not prioritise prestige when choosing. Additionally a number of respondents make an explicit link between HEI prestige and the social class of those attending.

A number of respondents do not seem to include prestige or ranking in their decisions. Gary considers that prestige and league tables are, “not really that important...I didn’t really hear much about the ones I’d applied for”, a view shared by Neill. Callum also rejects a prestigious choice, pointing to the pressure that would be involved, “[it] won’t look good on your C.V. for the rest of your life if you say that you didn’t do very well at one of those places”. However, he also points to the importance of avoiding an institution that is “too easy”.

Avoiding the lower ranking institutions is also a theme amongst other respondents. Matt is typical of a number of respondents, he does not feel confident that he could achieve the grades for the best institutions, but is against the lower ranked HEI in the community, “I wouldn’t like applying to Southampton Solent...we always joke about how it isn’t such a good university”. Beth also rejects Southampton Solent as a choice, “I didn’t want to go somewhere that’s got a really bad reputation”. Beth also has a clear perception that one should avoid HEIs that ask for low grades, “three Ds or something”. Beth, Jess and Sophie applied to Sussex, partly because of its prestige, but either didn’t get an offer or decided that a high offer might be too risky. Jess was also clear that she would avoid somewhere “near the bottom [because]...I think that I could do better”. Subject ranking rather than overall prestige is most significant for her; “I think that is probably most important, more than social life and all that”. Sophie has a broadly similar perspective, but started from a clearer perspective in terms of prestige, “initially I wanted to look at good universities”. However, as she began to consider her choices in more depth she moved to considering more criteria. In summary, she injected more

pragmatism into her decision, considering, “the points they were asking for”, but also what would, “suit me better”. In relation to her Sussex application she, “felt it was putting too much pressure on me to achieve that [high grades] in my A Levels and that may actually be worse for me”. Like her peers however, she still points to avoiding Southampton Solent because of its reputation.

Paige, Pete and Scott also considered prestige as a significant factor at the start of their process of choice, but moved to a different position. Paige was of the opinion that The Arts University College Bournemouth had a good reputation, and considered applying. However, after visiting, the HEI’s own emphasis on its prestige seems to have dissuaded her, “They think they’re all really high-up, don’t they...it didn’t make me feel very comfortable with it. So maybe it doesn’t make a big difference”. She confirms that it was not the difficulty of gaining a place that put her off, but the elitism. She expands on this, “somewhere with a higher reputation...[they]...might be looking at me...I think I’d feel intimidated”. Paige also points to the university’s emphasis on how much work would be required.

Pete looked initially at course ranking through league tables concluding that he should avoid, “somewhere that’s not very reputable...[and]...low standing”. Scott also started with a clear view of prestige and this made him question his interest in Winchester, where he later decided to study. He notes that his friends influenced his early view, “I felt that I should go to a uni that’s just as highly ranked as theirs”. However he changed his mind during his application. He also points to a discussion with his sister and her

boyfriend. According to Scott, they suggested that, whilst they attended quite prestigious institutions – Aston and Edinburgh – rankings changed during the time they attended. Scott has a clear view on this,

By the time they both came out both their unis had dropped quite a lot of places...where Winchester is a new uni, it's quite affluent; I was just thinking...maybe when I come out it will be higher.

He notes that although rankings point to some broad differences between top and bottom, "it's not a big deal...[if you choose an HEI]...within 20 or 30 spaces". Scott does point to avoiding the bottom HEIs. However he does seem to base his choices on impressions that do not seem to have been founded on ranking tables or historical reputation, "University of Winchester sort of sounds better than Oxford Brookes or Keele to be honest".

A minority of respondents give more weighting to prestige when making their choices. Alice, Vicky and Kate fit into this category. Kate links the prestige of an institution to the chances of gaining employment, noting, "it just sounds better...it sounds better to have said, 'oh I went here'". However, she tempers this through suggesting that "feeling comfortable" at an HEI is equally important. Alice also points to aiming for higher institutions and her mother suggested that she should "avoid polytechnics". Alice seems unclear about this dated distinction, however she did avoid former polytechnics and her firm choice was a pre-1992 university. However, within this context, she determined that

prestige was subordinate to other factors, “by the end...I wasn’t bothered...I was looking at whether I liked it”. Vicky, like Kate, identified that prestige could link to employment, and sees prestige in terms of a HEIs general ranking, “the universities I applied to, they were quite good for their subjects and the results, but it was more the university than the subject”. She links the prestige of her chosen HEI, Sussex, to future employment, “it’s a good university which is going to make a difference in later life...it will be easier on [employment] applications”. Whilst Vicky adopts an ideological or political position against elitism in education, she is nevertheless pragmatic.

If you’re going to go to uni and you’re going to have the whole ordeal and you can do it, you should go for the higher ones so that it does make it easier, because that’s the way it works unfortunately.

Vicky clearly links prestige to employment,

If you go anywhere or meet people that could help you, if you say you went to Sussex or Oxford...if anyone says they go to Oxford you’re immediately impressed because of the reputation. It’s the same with other high unis.

Partly for this reason Vicky decided against accepting an offer from Portsmouth. Vicky was a participant in the pilot focus group prior to her application. It is interesting to note the journey she has taken as she has thought more about choice. Her early position maintained that, “a degree is a degree”, but she moved to a position reflecting a high

value on ranking, prestige and the resultant employment opportunities. With a degree from Sussex, “it’s more demanding...you can meet the high expectation that an employer or someone else would expect from you”. However, this did not prevent Vicky rejecting Essex for the general location.

Finally, Fiona has quite a clear view of prestige. She also sees a clear link between high academic standing or prestige and employment, but as a candidate for a Radiography degree also links this to the associated medical facilities and hospital and their ranking or “standing”. She sees a direct link to employment, “it’s going to be what hospitals you worked at, what experiences you have”. In terms of employment, “specially looking to private hospitals [who] would be impressed the most”. However, again, liking the institution is the determining factor, “if I didn’t like it there at all it wouldn’t matter to me that it was the best. I just would not go there”.

## **7.6 Fear of failure – not fitting-in and social class**

In relation to prestige a further issue requires consideration; the degree to which prestige can link to elitism and to a social class position from respondents. This has already been highlighted briefly when discussing Paige’s experiences and her concerns that one of her choices was too elitist. This appears to link to a concern about “fitting-in” to an institution and may explain a relative ‘disinterest’ in the ranking of HEIs. Not fitting-in does seem to link to some kind of social class position, if only in relation to the very elite institutions. Respondents link these institutions to “posh people” and those who are privately educated. The net effect of this view appears to be limiting applications to the

top ranking institutions even where students might be able to achieve the necessary grades.

Emily has a very clear perspective regarding elite institutions, “I feel I wouldn’t fit in with their sort of patterns. I suppose I don’t think I would fit-in with their socialisation really”. Emily goes on to make a clear link to social class, and would avoid elitist HEIs such as:

St Andrews, Oxford and Cambridge...I know a few people do go there that weren’t privately educated, but it is quite a minority and I don’t think I would feel comfortable in an area that I am not really used to.

Fiona also links prestige and Russell Group attendance to “private school people” who she considers, “prepare” students for these institutions. Other students feel the same way: Scott feels that Russell Group HEIs, “will have more higher class people” and rejected Exeter as a choice as he thought people would be “pretentious”. His friend and a cousin attended Exeter, he notes that they are “pretentious” and, “they just didn’t seem open minded”. He points to this directly influencing his choice. Ryan also couldn’t see himself fitting-in, viewing certain HEIs as out of reach.

From what I see it’s always sort of Eton people who go to Oxford, Cambridge and so on. I just couldn’t picture myself ever really making any close ties;



we'd just have barely anything in common...I'd rather have someone from the same background as me.

Alice is more direct and considers that going to an elite institution like Oxford or Cambridge would “make me angry”.

Respondents in general have a good awareness of Oxbridge and its daunting reputation. Whilst the majority would be unlikely to gain the grades to attend, they nevertheless point to the institution as “elitist” and “stuck-up”. A number of respondents link this to social class and feel that if one did attend one would not “fit-in” and would feel “isolated”. So some consider that if they aim high they might fail.

To summarise responses in relation to prestige – few respondents consider that this is particularly significant in terms of choice. The majority appear to rate being *comfortable* ahead of prestige, perhaps seeing these categories as mutually exclusive. Many respondents are aware of the high-ranking status of Oxford and Cambridge, but often have little knowledge beyond this. When respondents do have an understanding of hierarchy within HEIs this, perhaps not surprisingly, is based on league tables rather than more historical reputation or mission group – although a few respondents were aware of the Russell Group. Where ranking is important to most, it is to avoid the “worse” institutions, and for some this means avoiding HEIs that ask for low grades or UCAS points. Some respondents considered prestige initially, only to move to their position later in the process of choice.

## **7.7 Institutional considerations in Higher Education choice**

Whilst general location appears to be the most significant aspect of choice, HEI also plays a role for some respondents. However, this is still linked to location or community for most and dovetails with other criteria, such as attending larger institutions to meet more people and “avoid isolation”. However, some respondents feel threatened by larger institutions and consequently avoid “big daunting things”. For these respondents, smaller HEIs can provide individual attention, familiarity and comfort.

For Vicky, Pete and Scott, the size of the HEI is a factor in choice. Vicky links this to the number of students you will meet, “the bigger the uni the better, really, because the more people you’ll meet and the more selection you’ve got of people you meet and get on with”. Vicky has decided to choose Sussex, she suggests that, “because it’s a bigger uni, you obviously get to mix with more people, be friends with more people, and their network of friends...the more people the better really”. Pete is in agreement, and although he maintains that he is not against smaller institutions, “I think maybe the bigger the better because it means there’s more going on”. Scott started from a similar position, and so “struggled” with the size of Winchester at first, however he later rationalised what 7,000 students meant, “it’s not much of a big deal”. Accommodation at his chosen HEI was also important.

This does link to the facilities an HEI can offer. This is a big part of Neil’s rationale for choice. He is choosing a science based course and is impressed by what Southampton

Solent have to offer, “it’s just amazing...the facilities they have there were really good and they had all the stuff that no one else does”. Neil is also impressed by the accommodation that, “looked really good”. Beth makes a link to facilities at The University of the West of England where a campus was important with “shops and stuff”, but primarily she seems to have been impressed by the accommodation, “I don’t want to be somewhere that I don’t feel comfortable in for a whole year”. She also points to a rejection of Plymouth because of “poor accommodation”. Kate also considers accommodation important, and this has been part of her decision to choose Birmingham, “it looks like a really nice place to be able to live in for your first year and get really involved”. She was not impressed with the accommodation at Exeter that did not have a “community”, but in Birmingham the student environment, “seems more involved with other students...rather than [needing to] just go out into town”. For Kate, the campus community is more important than the city, “with Birmingham...there being a student village...you have more chance to meet people on different courses”. In contrast she points to a rejection of London, and Royal Holloway College, because a busy city might diminish the university experience, “you would maybe draw away from the experience of being at university”.

Finally a further group of respondents link the specific choice of HEI to the degree to which they will fit-in at university. Sophie is against a larger institution, “I didn’t want to feel overwhelmed at a big university and feel quite small in myself and get lost in it”. However she wants it big enough for “more people my age”. Sophie also felt that the HEI required quite modern facilities, and perhaps steered away from a notion of

tradition. She felt that Oxford Brookes would not be suitable, “because of the whole Oxford connection”. Jess was also concerned that she would not like an “old” university and rejected Bristol on this basis. She also found large university campuses intimidating, “Sussex, I thought ‘this is quite big, this is scary’”. Jess consequently chose a more “compact campus” in selecting Portsmouth. Paige was also drawn to the smaller and “comfortable” campus at Winchester, “I felt I’d fit in more there”. However she points to the importance of her course rather than the location, seeing the HEI as “a bonus”.

## **7.8 Course choice**

Courses are key to a small number of respondents, although again, they still give general location primacy. Megan places a very significant emphasis on course and has dismissed more prestigious HEIs because the course did not suit her. She notes the, “better courses were actually closer to home”, better for Megan links to content, not prestige,

I wanted a course with practical, not theory, because I’ve just spent two years doing only theory with no practical, and I want to learn to be a teacher with practical, not just writing.

Megan has rejected The University of Bath on this basis, as the course was not suitable, and Megan instead elected to study at The University of Chichester, “its more contact time than any other universities with teachers, so you get more help and you’re on placements”. She summarises her position on choice:

Positive is obviously the course. That's essential. The course, the location and the homeliness of the place...the negatives...amount of people in classes and the contact time with teachers.

Ryan is another respondent who maintains that course choice is quite important. He has also selected Chichester as his firm choice and sees an overlap with his A Level studies in a positive light, "I'd be on familiar ground...I'd rather do something I'm familiar with and then be confident and get something good out of it". Gary has a similar view, linking the choice of his course at Chichester to "things that I'm interested in".

Course is also important for other respondents. Jess considered that with her chosen course, "everything just seemed to fit", Neil and Matt considered that the options available and resources were key, whilst for Fiona the course and the facilities were significant. Kate maintains that the course is paramount, "the course is really important to me...that is definitely what made Birmingham stand out", although as noted the HEI and in particular the 'student village' were of high significance. Other respondents point to lesser significance: for Sophie, "it wasn't mainly about the course...it was more a feeling I got for the course...teachers I met on open days".

## **7.9 Atmosphere and fitting-in**

The issue of *atmosphere* at an HEI is mentioned by a number of respondents, and is often linked to the notion of *fitting-in*. Whilst for some it seems to be about social life,

for others this is the key to being included or excluded at an institution and can 'make or break' a decision to choose an HEI.

When students discuss the atmosphere at an HEI on the whole they link this to social aspects of college life and making friends. Pete links the university experience with meeting a lot of people, and as suggested earlier, links this to a larger city or HEI. Megan proposes the opposite, linking smaller teaching groups and HEIs to the formation of friendship,

I like Chichester because you're with your class and there's only 30 of you in your class...you get to know them, you're friends with them and you're together a lot of the time.

Gary suggests, "you don't want to be sat around on your own", a theme echoed by Alice who wants to avoid being, "stuck by myself like a loner". Both Ryan and Vicky also point to a desire to meet friends, but don't specifically express concerns over possible isolation. However, Ryan does raise an issue in relation to social class. He sees no problems with making friends and fitting in at his chosen university, Chichester, but of higher-ranking institutions he notes, "I can't imagine making friends with people of a higher sort of class". Gary shares a similar perspective, "the higher-class ones, I think I'd find it harder to fit-in", whereas Kate speaks in broader terms about a "welcoming atmosphere".

In contrast, whilst Jess thinks that gaining independence is important, she does not emphasise the social side of university, “I am going to uni to get a degree, not to have fun”. However, Emily ably sums up the relationship between a range of factors. Enjoyment and, happiness and fitting-in were the reasons she chose Brighton, “I think if you are happy somewhere then you are more likely to flourish...[if]... you feel comfortable”. She links surroundings, general area and familiarity with fitting-in.

## **7.10 Conclusion**

Student responses suggest an emerging range of themes and concepts that are important considerations in choice. Central to such choice lies the issue of location. As such, this overrides other factors such as prestige, HEI and course. The role that location plays, and the way that students comprehend and understand location is examined in the following chapter.

## 8. Discussion and Theoretical Development

### 8.1 Introduction

Data analysis has interrogated the key issues posed by the two research questions, that is to say: the way that respondents differentially utilised *cultural capital* and *social capital*, any intra-class differences and the extent of any institutional influence. Responses point to a range of theoretical considerations, which will now be discussed.

### 8.2 Location

Responses suggest that location appears to be the most significant factor in terms of choice. Research concerning inter-class differences points to a geographical constraint on choice that only applies to working-class respondents (Reay, 1998; Reay, 2003a), however this nevertheless leaves an intra-class difference in terms of locality chosen. Nearly half the respondents in this research did have broad geographical choices and so this questions those who suggest that it is predominantly middle-class students who move away from home. It may well be the case that students from higher socio-economic groups have higher rates of geographical mobility (Christie, 2007; Holdsworth, 2009b), but I have also established that some working-class students also have a propensity to move away from their family home and their local area. It is also apparent that those who consider a broad range of geographical locations correspondingly have a broader range of Higher Education Institution (HEI) choice. One can conceptualise students in terms of locations between those who are applying to one



of the eight local HEIs, and those applying elsewhere. Additionally students can be grouped in terms of the prestige of the institution attended. However, what is noteworthy is how the students came to group themselves in such a way and what influenced that grouping.

The students who remain in the local area arguably have imposed some kind of *limitation on choice*. This is not to say that they won't have a rewarding and successful university experience, but a question remains as to why they imposed such a limitation. It is also apparent that the students who have elected to move away from the local area have given themselves a much broader range of choices and correspondingly potentially wider access to prestigious HEIs. Consequently for this group of respondents access to prestige may be non-direct. In general the students do not significantly prioritise prestigious institutions, however they largely rule out prestige by limiting choices. Prestige for many is non-direct or unintentional, for others it is a later consideration after general location. However the probability of access to prestige, at least in a relative sense, increases when fewer limitations are placed on location.

Unlike students from middle class backgrounds, who often prioritise HEI over subject, or arguably general locality (Reay, 1998; Reay, 2003b), my respondents largely prioritise location over other considerations. Where Brooks (2003b) identified a range of approaches and knowledge of status and prestige, my respondents seldom recognised ranking beyond knowledge of an 'Oxbridge' elite, and when judging degree of prestige this was a secondary consideration.

It is initially worth considering if any clear social class differences, in terms of occupational class, influence respondents. Pugsley (1998), in her study of higher education choices in South Wales, noted the distinct differences between working class and middle class students in relation to chosen locations. She established that the working class respondents had parents who wanted them to remain in the local area so that they could retain contact. In contrast, her middle class respondents had a better understanding of the status of HEIs in a range of locations and also thought that moving to another locale gave independence (Pugsley, 1998). Ball *et al* (2002a) also point to some concerns over financial cost that link location to HEI choices. Consequently, in this study, differences in terms of occupational class in the sample, perhaps between different factions within the working class, require consideration.

In broad terms the sample is drawn from working class participants, with two exceptions. If regarding the four students who intend to move away to the more prestigious institutions, seven of the eight parents have occupational roles that place them in lower social class groups according to the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) (Office for National Statistics, 2009). These range from cleaners to welders, and care workers to electricians. There is one exception, one of the two middle class students, Alice whose mother works as a Physiotherapist, although her father is a welder. If one makes a comparison with other students moving away, no significant differences are identified as these participants also fit into a similar pattern. Again, this group have one exception, the other middle class student Pete, whose father

is a bank manager. In terms of the students remaining in the local area, again no real difference is apparent and, again the same patterns are discovered.

### **8.3 Limitations on choice and extended choice**

Nevertheless, different students move away or stay at home and this requires more development. For those who stay local, I would suggest that certain criteria impose *limitations on choice*. It would seem from respondents that this often links to a risk or fear of isolation or being in a minority, which in turn relates to the issue of ‘not fitting-in’. Whilst this has been specifically linked to social class, and concerns over elitism at prestigious institutions (Reay, 2001), this research also, as has been demonstrated, can link not fitting-in to worries about locality. Gary had particular concerns about a ‘chaotic’ lifestyle, whilst Ryan couldn’t picture himself in a big city. Respondents like Neil link this to concerns over leaving the locality and not having access to friends or family. This pertains to concerns over feeling ‘intimidated’ in another locale. However, with the exception of one student, all from this research intended to move out of their family home and live independently, even when choosing local HEIs. This is perhaps a means of obtaining the *student experience* and this questions some of the previous research (Christie, 2007; Holdsworth, 2009b) suggesting that working class students perceive and experience HE in a very different way.

Another noted concern links to a ‘fear of the provincial’ or ‘the rural’. To avoid this some of the respondents have decided to stay in the local area. This however, also impacts on the group who are prepared to move away because some have avoided

supposed 'provincial' or 'rural' locations. This again is connected to a concern over 'not fitting-in'. Small and local institution can be seen as risky as they could lead to isolation. Vicky, who was fairly open about location in general, avoided The University of Essex, as it was too rural, as did Alice with The University of Kent.

## 8.4 Locational capital

Concern over 'fitting in' or being comfortable in a particular locale relate to a broader issue of *cultural capital* linked to location. Whilst a part of *cultural capital*, one might term this geographical capital or *locational capital*. All respondents have preferences and individual responses to different geographical locations, however some exhibit more concerns than others and so place limitations on themselves. It was noted earlier that the general geographical location of an HEI was probably the most significant factor when making choices. Given this, those in possession of *locational capital* are better able to make informed choices about location. Fiona is an example of someone with high levels of *locational capital*. She points to experiences of living in different locations, undertaking family holidays and travel. Whilst she has concerns over provincialism, her concerns are quite well informed and she is able to make sophisticated links between HEI, location and any fear of marginalisation or isolation. Fiona consequently would appear to have acquired *locational capital* as an aspect of *embodied cultural capital* through her family. *Locational capital*, then, is the accumulation of knowledge, perceptions and familiarity with a broad range of geographical locations. Taken to its most significant level it influences choices about moving in general, so on the basis of such knowledge Fiona was able to construct a cosmopolitan picture or understanding of

a given locale, utilising *locational capital* in the *field* of higher education choice. However, I would suggest that, although she was encouraged to reflect on this process during this research, she has *internalised* her values regarding location through her *habitus*, her “habitus is embodied” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 437.).

Other respondents who have elected to move away also exhibit differing degrees of *locational capital*. Vicky’s mother has encouraged her children to travel and Vicky’s sister studies at Sussex. This would appear to have given her a degree of *locational capital*, through the *social capital* that she has been able to utilise in this *field*, but this does not extend to all locations. The same is true of Emily, who has been exposed to Brighton through her cousin, and Alice whose mother has encouraged her to travel and accompanied her on HEI visits. Again, *social capital* produces *locational capital* in the *field* of Higher Education (HE) choice. This suggests that working-class students can effectively achieve geographical mobility through the possession of *locational capital*. This questions the link between social class and mobility and the necessity to possess *mobility capital* generated primarily through extensive travel during childhood and youth. Whilst Murphey-Lejeune (2002) does not foreground the significance of social class or socio-economic position, it is apparent that those who possess *mobility capital* appear to be from higher socio-economic groups. In my research, although not on an international basis, some of my working-class respondents are prepared to travel away from home. They have however not reported extensive travel or in particular residential aspect of travel and mobility as part of their experiences. Nevertheless, approximately half of them desire to move away from their local area. I suggest this is possible as they

utilise *locational capital* that they have derived from a range of sources. Consequently mobility is not solely linked to those in higher socio-economic groups nor is it necessary to possess *mobility capital*. One can however note, in common, a link to sibling influence, again although this is not restricted to respondents in higher socio-economic groups. Those who do move away might develop increased levels of cultural capital through their own mobility by moving away to an HEI (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005), but in this research they have not built cultural capital significantly through previous mobility.

It would appear that differential advice is given amongst participants in this research. Where proactive parental advice is provided this links to extended choice in terms of HE. This also links to a clear picture in relation to gender reflecting a suggestion by Hutchings and Archer (2001). My findings support Ball's (2003) contention that mothers make more impact, but Ball was concerned with middle-class families and a necessity for 'status maintenance'. In my research working-class mothers have identified that education is a means to social mobility for their children. This offers a new dimension to this debate.

Brooks (2004) discovered, through looking at intra-class differences amongst middle-class students, that fathers had greater interest in choices. In this study regarding working class students the opposite seems to be true. Where students made more proactive and informed choices that led to broader geographical options, they were more likely to have support and advice directly from their mothers as well as sisters and

female relatives. Again, mothers who are proactive, and who support a range of HEI choices contrast to the localism identified by Brooks (2004). Certainly, female respondents appeared more likely to discuss choices than their male counterparts, in common with Reay (1998). However, these discussions fundamentally seem to have been with their mothers and sisters. These family members were also more likely to have experienced higher education themselves. This does correspond to previous research (Brooks, 2004; Thomas and Quinn, 2007) that highlights the importance of parental participation in HE, but is not reflective of occupational position in this case. In many cases such experiences of HE attendance were undertaken later in life as a consequence of an Access to HE programme. However maternal support was also apparent for Kate whose mother had not attended HE. In contrast fathers are often rejected for having limited knowledge of HE. However, in agreement with Brooks (2003a), peers had limited influence on choice, in relation to location or other themes, although they did seem to persuade respondents to avoid the 'worse' institutions.

In contrast one could say that those who wish to stay in the local area lack *locational capital*. They may be more likely to have limited access to knowledge of other regions, or inaccurate knowledge, and this may be as a consequence of familial influence. A lack of knowledge of the locality may add to concerns over fitting-in. Therefore in relation to the overriding thematic influence of general location, familial influence from parents and siblings appears to be the most significant identifiable influence. What is apparent however, is that although some of the respondents might lack the *locational capital* to move away from the local area, they nevertheless wish to move away from their family

home and this questions the notion that they require the emotional security that home provides (Holdsworth, 2006). Nevertheless, staying in the area might mitigate some of the problems of reconciling student life, but whilst minimising risk, retaining opportunities for employment and allowing to some degree the opportunity to integrate into the culture of the HEI.

A further *limitation on choice* that again links to fitting-in appears to be a fear of prestige linked to social class and possible rejection. Paige gave a good indication of this with her experiences at The Arts University College Bournemouth. Emily also considered that she wouldn't 'fit-in' with "elite socialisation", and Scott points to "pretentious" people at the University of Exeter. Finally Gary is concerned that he won't fit-in with those who have "dinner parties" at their HEIs, perhaps indicating a fear of the middle class. This would certainly link to a Bourdieuan notion of *distinction* (Bourdieu, 1998). Gary appears to be intimidated by the culturally distinctive behaviours and *tastes* of middle class students, which excludes those from lower social class groups. He accepts this subordinate position, as do Ryan and Scott, as a consequence of the *symbolic power* exerted, and through internalising, "the natural order of things" (Webb *et al.*, 2002, p. 25.). According to Winkle-Wagner,

Bourdieu's claim is that these students anticipate that they will be sanctioned for not possessing the cultural capital that is rewarded by the educational system – the cultural capital of the dominant class – and they react to this anticipated rejection (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 19.).



If 'location' and 'prestige' or 'social class' can be a *limitation on choice*, so the same factors can also facilitate, enable or *extend choice* for some respondents. Therefore certain facets of *social capital* and *cultural capital* can facilitate broader options and in all possibility wider access to prestigious institutions. As suggested, *embodied familial cultural capital* can lead to the acquisition of *locational capital* and broader choice. However, *institutional cultural capital* might also facilitate broader choices.

In the questioning and discussion with respondents, the extent to which the college might influence or support HE choices was addressed. The responses given demonstrated that the college, as an institution, was fairly ineffectual in terms of providing, or enhancing, *institutional cultural capital* and choices. Respondents' experiences were inequitable and point to sporadic support. Some respondents did report a big impact, but seldom in relation to specific choices. What did emerge was informed support from a small number of teachers and tutors, for example Paige points to specific advice about choice. This corresponds to Brooks (2003b) who also discovered that teachers, over time, provide a broad influence. However, many respondents report a lack of support, such as Fiona. She indicated that her tutor knew very little. Whilst this might correspond to Reay's (1998) findings, suggesting some teachers possess cultural bias, this was not systematically or institutionally supported in my research. It also seems to be the case that the *Aim Higher* initiative only had limited success. Here it is not adequate to say that the college *institutional habitus* directed students at restricted options (Reay, 1998), however the sporadic nature of support renders the college

relatively neutral. Consequently as an influence the college, and any educational policy that it promotes or supports, offers little impact.

## 8.5 Hierarchies of choice and overriding influences

The research reveals that students are subject to factors that both impose *limitations on choice* or *extend choice*. These link to the degree to which individuals can access *social capital* and *cultural capital*. Where *social capital* and *cultural capital* are accessed this appears to be *embodied*. I would also suggest that students construct *hierarchies of choice*. That is to say, different criteria that are important, roughly constructed in ranking order. However one could point to a *composite effect*, when students link a range of themes or factors together that builds a more favourable choice. However in most cases any hierarchies are not dominated by prestige, but in this research general location, on the whole, would be given primacy. However, it is not that straightforward. Although students do construct such a hierarchy, indicated through the responses, some are also *overriding influences*. These are principles or factors that have a disproportionate influence on intended destination or HEI. Gemma provides a very clear example. Whilst she has different criteria to enable her to rank possible HEIs, she makes it abundantly clear that her father will not let her go to another locale. Megan also ties herself to the local community, and although considering options as far away as The University of Bath, rules this out with location being the *overriding influence*. For other respondents, such as Vicky or Alice, the *overriding influence* has been familial and has pointed them towards moving away at all cost. This also refutes suggestions (Christie, 2007) that it is only middle-class students who have geographical mobility.

## 8.6 Typologies of choice

Acknowledging the geographical or locational preferences and *overriding influences* as part of *hierarchies of choice*, respondents can also be divided into those who make choices in *differential* ways. It is however difficult to construct an accurate typology of choices or choosers and choosing appears to be relational and is part of a process in flux. Nevertheless, some differences are worth considering.

Some clear differences in choice link to the notion of instrumentalism, and themes for choice link to the instrumental nature of choice, or the perceived instrumental nature of choice. Some respondents identify institutions that will potentially give them a significant advantage; I term these respondents *externally instrumental*. They recognise the future impact of their choices. Vicky is a good example with a clear understanding of the impact that Sussex University could have. In contrast I suggest that other respondents have their own perception of what is instrumental. I term these respondents *internally instrumental*. They have their own notion of what will give future advantage, although this may not correspond to gaining 'real' advantage. Megan provides an example here. She has a strong rationale for choosing the University of Chichester, although rejects The University of Bath, a highly prestigious institution and a member of The 1994 Group. These notions of instrumentality link both to institution and course. Whilst different kinds of *instrumental choosers* are identified, other respondents are more *pragmatic choosers*. They have assessed where 'they can get in', and this forms the basis for their five Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) choices. Pete is a good example as he is prepared to consider a broad range of geographical

options and has calculated which institutions will give him realistic offers to maximise his choices. In general terms, those who have been more proactive in terms of choice, and have broadened options, have correspondingly proactive support from their parents who are not parents who are neutral.

## **8.7 Overriding activities and enabling activities**

Finally, the process of choice in terms of a timeline or chronology of choice also requires consideration. Whilst I have pointed to *overriding influences* on choice, I now suggest that, notwithstanding *overriding influences*, *overriding activities* also contribute to the process of choice. To illustrate this concept I point to Kate's experiences. Kate and her family were initially considering choices at local HEIs, as they had particular worries concerning cost. However, Kate points to a significant discussion with her mother that proved to be a turning point or critical point in the process of choice. Here she discussed finances with her mother, and once they both established the nature of funding arrangements, they then embraced a position where broader geographical options were possible. Megan also points to a discussion with a school teacher that "dispelled financial myths". These would appear to be *enabling overriding activities*, although in contrast one might experience a *limiting overriding activity*.

I would also suggest that events within the process could *endorse choices*. *Endorsing choices* do not have to be as significant as *overriding activities*; nevertheless they help to confirm choices. Visiting HEIs could provide this function, although visiting, if very significant could have a bigger impact. Parents could also endorse choices, for example

this happened to Sophie after an HEI visit with her mother. This is clearly active, not passive, familial support.

## 8.8 Conclusion

Findings and analysis indicate that working class students do make differential choices in relation to HEIs, although this in general is steered through a desire to live in a particular location. It would appear that these choices are influenced primarily through the family, and not significantly by institutional means or through broader networks of friends and peers. Where students are influenced this does seem to link to differing degrees of familial social and cultural capital, which I hope to have demonstrated links to an understanding of location and the transmission and acquisition of *locational capital*. Where intra-class differences emerge they seem to link to these factors as well as to some extent the degree of parental education. It has also been revealed that a particular pattern exists in relation to gender, but again this is facilitated through particular knowledge of a given locale. In considering the impact of such findings, and reflecting on the lack of demonstrable influence from educational institutions, the task remains to consider the implications for social policy and professional practice. Further a consideration of future research to investigate these issues in more depth is also required. These will both be considered in the following section.

## **9. Overview of the Research and Contribution to Professional Practice**

### **9.1 Introduction**

This final chapter begins by providing a brief overview of the substantive findings from this research before progressing to consider the implications for professional practice and the broader, but related, policy agenda. I then provide some reflection concerning the process of research and the methodology utilised. Finally, I consider the way that the research makes a contribution to the theory and practice of education before outlining future research questions and issues that arise.

### **9.2 Overview of findings**

This research was initiated as a consequence of my interest in the way that sixth form students make decisions about Higher Education (HE) choices. It stems from my professional practice as a sixth form teacher and tutor. I became concerned that the students in my college, who are often from lower social class groups, did not always appear to make HE choices that were in their best interests, often seemingly being unaware of some of the advantages of attending a prestigious institution. This raised the issue of the extent to which they might utilise cultural and social capital in making such choices. Hence this focuses on non-economic influences on choice utilising a Bourdieusian conceptual framework. This allowed me to critically consider a range of non-economic resources that intending applicants might employ when making their

choices. A Bourdieusian conceptual framework was outlined and explored during Chapter Four and subsequently applied to the results of grounded theory data analysis.

In the Literature Review the policy background was explored to consider if potential applicants from all social groups were being encouraged to participate in Higher Education. In the last fifty years the HE landscape has changed dramatically and has shifted to a system of mass education (Chitty, 2009), with significant increases in participation for groups from a broad range of backgrounds (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2012b). However, this has not been of equal benefit to all groups with those from higher social class groups continuing to gain a demonstrable advantage (The Sutton Trust, 2011) in terms of admissions to more prestigious institutions. The relative benefits of those in higher groups have been maintained and government policies have failed to significantly change patterns in this respect.

The Literature Review also considered the different ways that those in different social classes understood and decided if, where and what to study; hence examining inter-class differences. This revealed a significant advantage for middle class students in terms of their utilisation of social and cultural capital when making HE choices (Reay, 2001). Whilst a range of factors influence students they still derive a clear advantage from their social class position primarily through their family. However, those in the middle class do not utilise cultural and social capital in a uniform way. These intra-class differences were therefore explored as a third preliminary research question.

Whilst literature revealed distinct difference within the middle class (Brooks, 2004; Power, 2000; Power *et al.*, 2003), a gap in the literature emerges in relation to working class students. Whilst the working class, like the middle class, are not a homogenous group, any differential influence and approach to choices have not been comprehensively examined. This question therefore became the basis of this research.

Chapter Five outlined the way that the focus groups and interviews provided rich data concerning the way that potential HE applicants make their choices. Systematic grounded data analysis was undertaken and through comprehensive coding and memo writing some noteworthy concepts and theoretical constructs were established.

Focus groups and interviews examined reasons for HE choice in terms of themes and the ways that students felt they might have been influenced. The participants were quite polarised in terms of choices into those who wanted to either 'stay local' or 'move away'. When their decisions were made influences on such decisions linked to parents, siblings, other family members and peers.

The most significant influence on choice was the family and in particular parents, who reportedly exerted influence over general location, which in this research has become the most important factor in choice. Where parents were more proactive in supporting students this often linked to consideration of a broader range of locations and recognition of the benefits of HE. Often mothers were more proactive than fathers, and female respondents often interpreted this as their mothers wanting them to 'escape' from



traditional feminine roles. Some views of general location were influenced by perceptions of crime in a particular locale, although did not always correspond to crime rates. In their support parents could perform an enabling or limiting strategy. In addition siblings appeared to have a role to play, particularly in relation to older siblings for female respondents. This operates as an encouragement to attend HE, or in terms of siblings who have not attended, as a warning.

Other influences on choice were less significant. Friends and other relatives could be supportive. The media also had limited impact, although research could have been more effective. Perhaps most surprisingly the college had little institutional impact. Individual teachers, tutors and student services had impact on individual students, but this was sporadic at best and usually had little bearing on HE choice.

The most important theme in choice, often influenced by parents, linked to overall geographical location. Geographical choice, when staying within commuting distance, also acted as a limitation in terms of choice and prestige. Sub-themes that developed further in terms of choice tied to: a desire to remain local, the pleasure of moving away for independence or linked to the fear of a rural or provincial location. Where concerns were expressed these often linked to risk or fear of not fitting-in. Fitting-in was also linked to more prestigious institutions and social class. Finally, the prestige or ranking of an Higher Education Institution (HEI) was, for most, not significant, at least by the end of the process of choice. Those who opted for prestige normally were the same

respondents whose parents, and often mothers, had been more supportive and proactive in the process of choice.

The findings of the research then raised a number of conceptual and theoretical issues: the most significant being the link to general location, and the difference between those ‘staying local’ and those willing to go further afield. When staying local limitations are apparent.

The two participants whose parents have middle-class occupations made the choice to move away from the local area. However, other students all had working class backgrounds, but had different experiences – or intra-class differences. Such intra-class differences particularly seem to hinge on the extent to which a student will feel comfortable or fit-in at a given location. I suggest that many of those who are prepared to consider broader options possess a higher degree of *locational capital*. Those with higher levels of *locational capital* can point to different experiences that have developed this resource. These relate to exposure to cultural and social capital through experiences such as travel and contact with those who have travelled or moved such as parents or siblings. In contrast the converse is true of those with low levels of *locational capital*, they potentially don’t seem to have been exposed to the same experiences and influences and have perhaps internalised or have embodied a more ‘local’ view.

Allied to *locational capital* are other areas that leave some respondents better placed to ‘fit-in’ at university in a wider range of choices. This appears to link to those who have

had access to a family member or friend who has attended university although this is not always the case. Where those who are more reluctant to move away often cannot see themselves in another locale, those with a role model, feel more able to take a step further and move away from the area.

This research confirms that the degree of exposure or access to cultural capital can limit or extend choice. Some influences are particularly significant, such as an overly dominant parent or a supportive sibling, and they constitute *overriding influences* and have a profound effect on some of the respondents. For other respondents a *limitation on choice* links to a fear of prestige that is associated with social class and possible rejection – possibly as a consequence of not possessing middle class *tastes* which form a *distinction*. It would seem that location, prestige and social class could all provide *limitations on choice*. These issues do not seem to have been addressed through the college enhancing *institutional cultural capital*.

Where students impose *limitations on choice* or *extend choice*, through utilising cultural and social capital they construct *hierarchies of choice* where they rank criteria to determine their final decisions. When doing so some further differences emerge in terms of those who appear to be *externally* or *internally instrumental*: so those who recognise the future impact of their choices and those who have a perception, perhaps not ‘correctly’, of the impact of their choices. Some respondents are more *pragmatic* – they apply where they can ‘get in’.

In summary, the findings do point to a range of criteria that demonstrate complex intra-class differences. These result in the selection of broadly different geographical locations and fundamentally are influenced by the family. The extent to which these findings further knowledge in this area and contribute to the field of education and professional practice are discussed below.

### **9.3 Implications for professional practice**

In establishing a relationship to professional practice a number of issues arise as a consequence of the research undertaken. These primarily point to potential changes to local practice, both in relation to short term and longer term influences and support for students. These also relate to the broader HE policy agenda, and the extent to which it supports choice.

In terms of supporting HEI choices this research suggests that institutional factors play a limited role in influencing choice. Student choices fundamentally link to familial influence and in broad terms the college has little direct influence regarding the current cohort of students. The limitation on institutional influence could link to both the primacy of familial influence, or inadequate collegiate provision. Whilst the former cannot fundamentally be quickly addressed the latter can. However, any approach to further support has longer-term implications for a broader community role for the college.

Respondents who seem to have some of the broadest options, and the corresponding access to prestige, have often benefitted from parental encouragement that derives from parent's own participation in education, often within the local community. Consequently, a further college role might take a longer view; through further encouraging and engaging the participation of adult learners, institutional cultural and social capital might be developed for future generations. This could consequently be seen as an additional role for community engagement of post-19 learners.

In engaging the community the college needs to focus on both an educational offer that appeals to a lifelong learning agenda, together with embedding information about higher education. This could facilitate the flow of knowledge within the community concerning education. However, whilst this might have some influence concerning choice, given that choices are linked to general location the extent to which one might have an impact is limited. Nevertheless, policies could target the development of *locational capital* as a form of *bridging capital*.

Whilst college influence is limited, the research nevertheless points to a failure to offer a consistent level of support. Where respondents do report a positive impact this seems to be linked to an individual example of good practice rather than a coordinated institutional response. This is further problematized through the type of support offered. In most cases where college staff had an impact this tended to be in relation to general support for higher education participation. In contrast, any guidance in relation to specific HEIs tended to be very limited with many teachers or tutors offering no support

in this area. This might suggest a training need and a shift in college policy, but in any event requires local implementation. Indeed, practitioners might feel that advice in this area is too prescriptive. However, at both the level of general advice or advice concerning HEIs, only limited support is provided. Whilst the college cannot hope to shift the whole community in terms of HEI or locational knowledge, where it could have impact this is not being maximised.

In terms of policy, little can be noted that suggests any improvement concerning widening participation in relation to choice. The cohort of students that forms the basis of this research is the last to benefit from 'relatively' inexpensive fees (circa £3,000 per annum). Whilst further changes to cost, with students paying up to £9,000 per annum, clearly have the possibility of significantly changing patterns of participation and choice in the future.

#### **9.4 Evaluation of research process**

The research process has been rewarding, frustrating and enlightening in equal measure. I feel that some thorough planning and excellent supervisory support paved the way for a successful thesis. However, this did not diminish some of the practical problems that needed resolving. As I outlined in Chapter Five, the research undertaken employed a broadly interpretative, though critical paradigm to address research questions and understand students' motivations, meanings and behaviour in relation to HE choice. Focus groups and interviews were conducted and a broadly grounded theory approach

was taken to data analysis. Ideas were conceptualised and later explored in relation to a Bourdieusian conceptual framework.

In terms of the research process a number of stages can be identified that posed different challenges and problems. The most unproblematic aspect of the research involved the planning in preparation for both the pilot and the main phase of the research. It was certainly straightforward to theoretically consider the best way to approach problems, but in the field these were more vexing.

Utilising research methods posed some early challenges in the research primarily linked to questioning and participation. Whilst I roughly followed a script for questions it was difficult to consistently follow this, although I had always allowed for questions to veer off at interesting tangents. However, with practice this improved. Participation in focus groups was also an issue, and although I had ample potential participants they did not always materialise at focus group meetings. Nevertheless, a good number did attend making the research viable.

On reflection, I think that the most significant problems that occurred during the research were a result of my decision to utilise a constant comparative method of data analysis. My intention when undertaking focus groups and interviews was to transcribe and code responses quickly after completion to allow me to systematically identify categories and 'saturate' these through modification of subsequent questioning (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007). Whilst I managed this to some extent, particularly

between focus groups and interviews, this was not possible after each interview as transcribing and coding were too time consuming for a quick turnaround. I feel that this inevitably left areas of interest underdeveloped, for example a thorough examination of the role of the media. The different stages of coding were extremely time-consuming. However, I feel that this was an effective mechanism for data analysis, and did enable me to discover some interesting conceptual and theoretical material. Nevertheless, if undertaking again I would allow more time, in particular allowing time between interviews for coding.

Adopting a grounded theory approach to data analysis also involved a degree of compromise. In traditional grounded theory approaches, literature is not examined prior to undertaking primary research (Glaser and Strauss, 2009). This allows the theory to rise from the data gathered, rather than being tainted by preconceptions derived from the literature. In my research I undertook a large extent of the literature review before completing data analysis and I am sure that I had certain ideas concerning cultural and social capital in my mind when coding data. However, I would defend this approach on two counts. Firstly, regardless of approach to data analysis, I would suggest that all researchers have a sound understanding and knowledge of a range of literature and so have preconceived ideas. This could colour their data in any event. Secondly, a grounded theory approach, through systematically coding data, reduces the chances that ideas derived from elsewhere will interfere with the data.



Finally, a more theoretical problem is posed as a consequence of utilising a Bourdieuan conceptual framework. This however seems difficult to resolve. Whilst respondents have provided much rich data concerning HE choices, which I hope developed the field of study, one cannot ignore the *embodied* nature of cultural and social capital. It is the very nature of these predispositions and inherent understanding of cultural norms and values that make the research problematic. I have tried to capture the way that respondents understand the way that they have acquired their values, but this remains an issue.

## **9.5 The development of theory and contribution to the field of educational research**

In Chapter Three, whilst reviewing literature, intra-class differences were discussed in relation to HE choice. Although middle-class intra-class differences have received some attention, amongst working class-students this area was identified as a being a generally underdeveloped area within the field of HE choice. This research has sought to bridge this gap and it raises issue that are pertinent to the field of study. I have also clearly addressed the research questions posed as demonstrated above.

The findings of the research point to the development of a new theoretical concept: *locational capital*. *Locational capital*, which I suggest is the accumulation of knowledge, perceptions and familiarity with a broad range of geographical locations, is acquired through exposure to both cultural and social capital. Those students who have acquired *locational capital* appear to be more able to consider a broad range of locations, and so open access to more HEIs and the possibility of access to more

prestigious institutions. Whilst one can perhaps assume that middle class students might have greater access to this resource, nevertheless the working class respondents in this research also have differing access to *locational capital* which points to an explanation for intra-class difference.

Whilst *locational capital* is the most significant development from this research, I also consider that in exploring intra-class differences that some of the decision-making processes and influence on these processes also add to the field. *Limitations on choice* and enabling strategies to *extend choice* have been examined and build into a concept of *hierarchies of choice* and *overriding influences* and activities. Finally, different typologies of choice, *externally instrumental*, *internally instrumental* and *pragmatic* have been considered.

The theories and concepts discussed also point to professional practice, discussed above, and in broader terms educational policy. Finally, I hope that these ideas can be developed further through subsequent research – as outlined below.

## 9.6 Future research

Through undertaking this research a range of analytical and theoretical areas have emerged that could be developed further. The first area links to the way that cultural and social capital are derived and circulate within families and thus might be further examined through *family biography*. The second, links to further development of the notion of *locational capital*.

Research undertaken had a clear focus on one generation of students, although I did ask respondents how they had been influenced by parents and other relatives. Whilst respondents cited clear themes for choice, primarily linking to broad geographical location, these reasons nevertheless are often linked to a perspective potentially derived from their parents and possibly their siblings. In these circumstances, the way that parents and siblings understand choice and their influences require investigation to aid the construction of inter-generational family biographies. These could lead to a better understanding of the way that knowledge of higher education circulates and aid possible routes for intervention. Research has been undertaken concerning familial influence, biography and participation, but this has not been fundamentally explored in relation to choice and specifically intra-class difference. One way that familial influence might be further examined links to the notion of network-based decision making, an area explored to some extent by Heath *et al* (2010). Whilst their research was concerned with non-participation in HE they nevertheless raise the prospect of examining the transmission of social capital between parents and siblings, so through both vertical and horizontal means, noting that sibling influence has been neglected (Heath *et al.*, 2010). Where sibling influence has been explained they point to a range of research that offers a negative view of sibling influence, suggesting that siblings are often competitive (Coles, 2006; Sanders, 2004), although note research pointing to a positive influence (Connor, 2001). The approach of Heath *et al* (2010) supports my suggestion for inter-generational family biography, or in their terms ‘inter-generational networks’ (Heath *et al.*, 2010). I would suggest that the range of interactions and influences require investigation in

relation to parents, siblings and other family members. This also ought to take account of the more subtle embedded influences that emerge as well as the more overt encouragement to study.

When examining parental influence another clearly related issue relates to parental education. Where parents had undertaken an HE course this was often accessed through a non-traditional route, such as an Access course and completed as a mature student. Those parents seem to have exerted a particular kind of influence, often adding to *locational capital*, and so the role of lifelong learning in their lives also needs further consideration when constructing family biographies.

The second clear area that requires further development links to the notion of *locational capital*. The research undertaken, points to the importance of the overall geographical location of the HEI when making choices. This could be seen as an aspect of cultural capital, but remains significant in its own terms. Some recent research that sheds light on this area links to the formulation of *cosmopolitan capital* (Weenink, 2007; Weenink, 2008). Weenink points to a notion of cosmopolitanism that is built on the idea of, “global connectedness...[and]... open-mindedness towards the Other” (Weenink, 2008, pp. 1089-1090.). I would suggest that such a notion links to a ‘familiarity’ and knowledge of a broad range of locations and might further develop a conceptualisation of *locational capital*. Weenink however, directly links cosmopolitanism to social reproduction within the upper middle class (Weenink, 2008). Again, whilst this is linked

to specific educational routes that have a direct focus on internationalised education, this is relevant for the development of *locational capital*.

Whilst a range of conceptions of *cosmopolitanism* and *cosmopolitanization* are discussed by Weenink, reference is made to Hannerz's (2000) definition that relates to "a willingness to engage with the Other...[and]...an intellectual and aesthetic openness towards divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity" (Hannerz, 2000; Weenink, 2008, p. 1091.). Whilst this definition has an international character, and where Weenink defines cosmopolitan capital in terms of, "a propensity to engage in globalizing social arenas...[and]...engage confidently in such arenas" (Weenink, 2008, p. 1092.), I would suggest that the further development of *locational capital* might rather point to 'a propensity to engage in *national* social arenas'. Different types of parents are also identified and divided between "dedicated and pragmatic cosmopolitans" (Weenink, 2008, p.1093.). The former offer flexibility and open-mindedness, whilst the latter see the competitive advantage that can be achieved through a cosmopolitan outlook (Weenink, 2008). It is also noted that this *cosmopolitan capital*, at least for *dedicated cosmopolitans*, is *embodied*, "the incorporation of an international if not a global perspective on one's own life course" (Weenink, 2008, p. 1099.). Again, in establishing a notion of *locational capital* one might point to an embodied form of a *national* perspective.

What however is also interesting is the way that two different types of parents are identified and termed "dedicated...[or]...pragmatic cosmopolitans" (Weenink, 2008, p.

1093.). *Dedicated cosmopolitans* quite overtly teach children “to be flexible and open minded” (Weenink, 2008, p. 1094.) and encourage their children to explore the world. In contrast *pragmatic cosmopolitans* are more focussed on gaining material advantage for their children (Weenink, 2008). It would be interesting to assess if these are some of the different attributes of my sample of respondents that could add to a notion of *locational capital*. It could also be important to consider how *cosmopolitan capital* is derived – the extent to which it might be embodied or any institutional impact.

## 9.7 Conclusion

To briefly conclude, the research undertaken has revealed a great deal about the way that students make choices and the differential advantage or disadvantage that some groups receive. The importance of *locational capital* and associated concepts is unique to this research. It gives a clearer understanding of the way that HE applicants extend or reduce their opportunities through using location as an overriding factor rather than HEI, prestige or course. *Locational capital* also provides a development of Bourdieusian social theory as a means to understanding inequalities in education. It also offers a new conceptual model to understand higher education choice and goes some way to explaining why working class respondents display intra-class differences. The purpose of this research is not solely to investigate and understand this area, but to also provide critical reflection and through contributing to the field make an impact on policy and professional practice. I hope that this aim will be achieved.



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# 11. Appendices

## 11.1 Appendix 1 – Permission letter

Our ref: [redacted]pwoodward

7 March 2011

Tel: [redacted] AX [redacted]  
[redacted]  
[redacted]

Phil Woodward  
[redacted]

Dear Phil

Thank you for your memo of 6 March 2011 regarding your Open University Doctoral Research Project. I am pleased you are making progress with your Doctorate. I would be interested, at an appropriate stage, to learn more about the research findings. I am happy for you to continue your research at the College in 2011 and 2012.

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]  
Principal



## **11.2 Appendix 2 – Letter to potential participants**

### **Open University Doctoral Research Project**

**An investigation into the way that sixth-form students make university  
and course choices**

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From:

**Philip Woodward**

Pastoral Adviser

Room 206

 College



Email: 

Tel: 

Date: January 2010

I am writing to invite you to take part in a research project that I am undertaking, as part of a Doctorate in Education, that concerns the way that sixth form students make choices about which university and courses to apply for as part of the UCAS application process. I want you to be as informed about the project as possible to help you make your decision, but very much hope that you will feel that you are able to take part. The project has been approved by the college principal, [REDACTED], who fully supports the aims of the research.

What is the project about?

You are probably aware that as sixth-form students you have the opportunity to apply to university. As part of this process you have a range of different universities that you can apply to and within these universities a wide range of courses. The aim of this project is to learn more about the way that you make choices and the kinds of influences that are important. The project will then help to inform the way that the college gives advice to students to improve the process of applying to university.

If you agree to take part, what will you be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in a focus group together with a small number of other college students. Focus groups are a way that a small group of people can discuss a particular topic, in this case university choice. The focus group will take place at [REDACTED] College and will last no more than two hours, although it will probably take less time

than this. This focus group is part of the pilot phase of the research. At a later stage, in about a year, two more focus groups will be completed together with interviews. I must emphasise, however, that taking part in the focus group this year does not necessarily commit you to further involvement – although I very much hope that you will want to do so.

What's in it for you if you take part in the project?

First and foremost, it should be interesting!

This is an important opportunity for you discuss university choice with your peers. You will be able to reflect on the discussions held in the focus group and this should help you to consider your own application to university in more depth. These discussions will also probably prompt you to seek more advice from the college.

What will happen to the data collected about you?

In all accounts of the research, data will be anonymised, and confidentiality will be assured. Your data will only be accessed by myself and my doctoral supervisor. We have a responsibility to behave ethically at all times, and will follow the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines (2004).

Suppose you drop out of the project before the end?

This is an entirely voluntary project and it is not linked in any way to your progress at the college. You can withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons and will be able to request destruction of any data you have given to me up to that point. It goes without saying, however, that I think that you will find it interesting and I very much hope that you will continue to participate throughout the project.

What do you need to do now?

Please read through the consent information attached. If you choose not to participate you need do nothing more, and you will not be contacted again. If, on the other hand, you choose to participate would you please complete the following consent form and return it to me. You will then hear from me shortly when I will confirm the arrangements for the focus group.

**Name:**

**Signature:**

**Tutor Group:**

**Email Address:**

**I have read and understand the nature of my involvement in the project  
and I will take part in its initial stage during the current academic year.**

**An investigation into the way that sixth-form students make university  
and course choices**

### **Consent Information**

**I understand that:**

this is related to an extended doctoral research project, but that by participating in it during this year I am not making any commitment to involvement in later stages;

both this pilot phase and the main phase of the research are concerned with finding out more about the way that students make choices regarding university and course choices. I have been fully informed of the aims and purposes of the project;

there is no compulsion for me to participate in this research. If I choose not to take part, this will not affect my progress at the college in any way;

if I do choose to participate, I may at any stage withdraw my participation. If I choose to withdraw, this will not affect my progress at college in any way;

any of the information which I give will be used solely for the purposes of this research which may include publications;

the information that I give may be shared between the researcher, his supervisor and the university examiners that are participating in or assessing this project. At the end of the project it may be offered in fully anonymised form to the university and other academic libraries;



confidentiality will be respected by the researcher with regard to the information which I give, including the use of pseudonyms etc in order to preserve anonymity to the greatest possible extent.

### **11.3 Appendix 3 – Focus group – example of transcript**

#### **Focus Group Two**

**Interviewer:** [Discusses project] So you've made your five choices and you've applied to university. In terms of the five to start with, how did you make your choice?

**Sophie:** I looked at online on the UCAS website which universities did sociology initially to get an idea of whereabouts in the country they do them, and then I looked on the websites specifically of ones that caught my eye, for instance, ones that were fairly southern and near the coast to see what their courses entailed.

**Interviewer:** And what do you mean by 'caught my eye'?

**Sophie:** I didn't want to go anywhere too faraway and I didn't want to go anywhere really inner city, somewhere that I wasn't familiar with, so ones that I recognised, ones that I'd heard about from other students, that kind of thing, those ones that caught my eye.

**Fiona:** I basically did the same but I made a list because obviously there aren't loads of unis that do the course I wanted to do, which is Radiotherapy, so

made a list on Excel and then I deleted the ones I definitely knew I didn't want to go to like Cumbria and Teeside because they are too faraway. So I went through it like that, sort of the opposite to Sophie. Rather than choosing the ones I liked, I just deleted ones I didn't like and made it down to a final list.

**Interviewer:** So yours is the opposite way round – negative. You're "I do want those."

Fiona: Yes.

Gemma: Basically, I had no choice really in the matter where I was going to go. Mine was very specific to it can't be more than basically six or seven hour drive away due to parent reasons, so I was lumbered with what I had in the general area.

**Interviewer:** We will talk about parent reasons or parents. If you're happy to share things, share things. If you're not comfortable sharing things then don't. You should only say what you feel like you're happy to say. So region seems important. What other features? So region, catching your eye ... well, part of that, you've got your lists. What other criteria do you look for in a university that influence your choice?

Gemma: I say size.

**Interviewer: Size of the university.**

Gemma: Yes, I don't like big daunting things that scare me. I get a bit intimidated.

Fiona: I agree.

Gemma: I'm like no. That's one of the reasons why I came to this college because it was small and everyone could get to know faces rather than going to somewhere miles away and it being huge and you're completely out of your comfort zone. A nice secluded one, that will do me.

**Interviewer: Is that what you've ended up with on your list?**

Gemma: Yes, pretty much, like Winchester. The only big one I've got is Portsmouth and Bournemouth, and that's about it. The rest I'm either familiar with or I feel comfortable with.

**Interviewer: Factors, criteria?**

Sophie: I think for me it was the course. Because there was such a range in sociology with the whole statistical side of it or that kind of thing, I wanted the course that suited me the best, so more theories and not such a mathematical side to things. I looked at which ones did the right courses for me as well.

Fiona: For mine being within the NHS based, I was looking for good facilities. A lot of them have 3-D theatres you can go into and have a look around,

and also what hospitals they were based in. I didn't want to be based in a really secluded hospital, and how far away the hospitals are from the unis because I have to pay for accommodation there.

**Interviewer: How important is accommodation in general at the university?**

Sophie: I'd say it's pretty important, especially in the first year when it's all very new and it's a big step for me particularly moving out and moving away. I need to feel comfortable and like I've not just been thrown in the deep end. I think accommodation is important to me. I'd really like to get halls in the first year, but if the university, for instance, Portsmouth, is more inner city then it wouldn't be such a problem because the accommodations are dotted around anywhere, whereas on a campus I'd have to move away from the university, so that's a factor for me.

**Interviewer: Accommodation important?**

Gemma: I think it's quite important because the thing is you're going to be living there for at least a year or maybe even more, because you're going to be going to that university for roundabout three or maybe even four years, so accommodation is really key. But for me, my accommodation was always going to be based at home. I wasn't going to be moving out.

**Interviewer: So you're going to stay at home.**

Gemma: Yes, I'm staying at home.

**Interviewer:** And you're not, by your choices.

**Fiona:** No, I'm not staying at home. Mine was I wanted nice halls because I went on a university summer school and they were quite ... Well, it was in Southampton and they were quite modern and they were quite nice, but they were like the top end of the market and I can't afford that, so I wanted to ... and we did have a look around the other ones and you could see them getting worse and worse, so I still wanted cheap but not horrible and nasty.

**Interviewer:** Are there certain types of university? Are universities in groups, types, categories? Are there certain ones you're drawn to or certain places you discount or reject?

**Gemma:** I think the university's whole status. There are some universities that have a very good status, i.e. like Oxford and Cambridge, so thinking of going to those is daunting enough and it's like "Am I going to get the grades to go to that posh end" and then you've got the opposite of Solent because compared to Oxford and all that it's kind of like, yes, oh dear.

**Interviewer:** With the Oxford and Cambridge, is it just the grades?

**Gemma:** I think it's the expectations. I see it as status of like colleges, normal sixth form colleges and all that. It's completely the same. People just put ... everything has to be status.

Sophie: I think I'd find it difficult because of the social groups that you get in certain places and the people that it attracts. Because I went to another college before I came here, there seemed to be a lot of people that thought a lot of themselves and I felt a bit isolated from that. They seemed to be a bit "We're better than everyone, so we're not going to accept you." So if I get that impression from a really high status university then I would feel a bit I might not fit in here socially as well as otherwise.

Fiona: I don't really care about the status of the uni. I'd rather know that I can go somewhere and I can fit in and be happy for the next three or four years than go somewhere and be unhappy, knowing that the education I'm getting is better.

**Interviewer: You've said the status isn't as important and you've mentioned status. How do you know about the status of a university in the first place?**

Fiona: I think it's a lot of your local area. Round here people know that Southampton is miles better than Solent, but then in Bristol people know that Bristol is miles better than UWE, but down here people aren't so aware of the reputation that UWE has got.

Sophie: I think you'd get that impression from open days, going to the actual universities and getting a feel for where they are in the area and who are

the other people that are going to look around the university and that kind of thing.

Gemma: And also the people that are there as well because they also have former students there, so you can get ... People say first impressions and all that, but first impressions will tell you a lot about a person. If they come across a bit snobby I'll go "Right, let's try a second impression." And if in the second impression they don't impress me then I'm not happy.

Fiona: Around here, if you're taking the mickey you say "Oh, you're going to end up at Solent" whereas in Bristol that will be "Oh, you're going to end up at UWE" which I think you don't ...

Gemma: I've never heard that one.

Fiona: Because I was brought up there I know what it's like. So if you do well you go to Bristol but if you don't you go to UWE and that's the same round here. You guys don't realise that because you don't' come from around there.

Gemma: The whole thing about going to Solent, but I know what you mean.

Fiona: If Solent did my course I would apply there because I went to an open day there with my friend and it was really nice and I really liked it. They just don't do my course. It does get said and it does get joked around, and like "I don't want to end up there" sort of thing.



**Gemma:** A university is a university at the end of the day. It's a degree that you're getting. It's about the status that you're getting with the ... Basically just the level that you're getting from the degree and that's what for some people get ...

**Interviewer:** It's quite interesting you're talking about peer influence, so your friends and peers at college. You say there's some banter about it. Do you discuss your choices with your friends? How much have people at your college or in your friendship groups influence your choices?

**Gemma:** My friends couldn't influence me in my choices. I had other reasons.

**Sophie:** I think before you even start thinking about which universities, you do get an impression of ... like with Solent, it's always ... in Southampton it's always if you're going to go to a Southampton one go to Southampton Uni rather than Solent, and I knew that before I even thought about which university to go to. But I wouldn't say it's influenced me now because I get quite a lot of stick for putting Portsmouth on it because of the whole Southampton-Portsmouth thing, but I still like Portsmouth as a university so it hasn't affected me that way.

**Interviewer:** So friends haven't affected ...

Sophie: Not really.

**Interviewer: Have friends affected you?**

Fiona: Slightly more because where I'm looking to go to somewhere completely different knowing that my friends are ... at least one or two of my friends are going to be within an hour's train journey. That's a lot better. One of my best friends, she's not going to uni but she's going to work in Norfolk, so applying to Suffolk I feel ... Obviously not she's going to be there every day, but I do feel a bit better to think if I really was unhappy that she would only be an hour away.

**Interviewer: So it's your proximity to friends, how close you are to friends.**

Fiona: Yes, and it makes me feel a bit better being that far away from home knowing that they're not all here still and that they are, some of them are only going to be an hour or so away.

**Interviewer: Some of the research suggests that students make comparisons against other students and by those comparisons they then judge whether they think they could go to university. Does that ring true?**

Sophie: I think it would be difficult to because all of my friends have picked such different subjects and I'm course based. It would be difficult for me to do that.

**Interviewer: So that's not an issue.**

Sophie: No.

Fiona: None of mine have.

**Interviewer: What about family then? You've mentioned family before. How have your families, parents, guardians, mothers, fathers, how have they influenced your choice? What have they said about choice?**

Fiona: My said I've got no choice, that I have to go to uni because he ... It was always like he doesn't want me to have the life that he had, so he's always pushed me, and he doesn't really ... the same with my mum but not so much my mum now I don't live with her, but with him he doesn't know a lot about it but he'll always ... whenever I got really down and I've been like "I want to get a job, I don't want to go to college anymore" he's always been like "No, that's not an option. You don't have that option. You're staying in college."

**Interviewer: So he's got a positive influence. Has he had any influence on where you're likely to go or what you're likely to do?**

Fiona: Not really what. He had an influence on where but not like being close to him, but like when I went for my Suffolk interview he went and walked round Ipswich and he came back and said "It's really nice. I really like it." So even though I didn't walk around as much as he did, because he

was like “Yes, it’s nice” I felt like that’s going to be okay then and I said  
“Come and visit me.”

**Interviewer:** So he didn’t have that knowledge of different universities but liked  
the idea of university.

Fiona: Yes.

Gemma: My mum was really supportive. She said “Go wherever you want”  
because when I first applied to go to university in my second year of  
college I applied to go to Aberdeen and that kicked up a ruckus for my  
dad because I was living with him at the time, and he said “No, I need to  
be able to get to you and back in the same day – a maximum of six or  
seven hours. And he wouldn’t let up, so in the end I had to cave. I didn’t  
go to uni in my second year. I stayed on at college for a third year, and  
because I was living with him at the beginning of the year he also  
influenced that. I’d got five choices and they’re all within driving  
distance and it’s easy to commute every day.

**Interviewer:** If you want to share it, did he have a reason why he wanted to get ...

Gemma: My personal view is that he’s controlling. He has to have women  
controlled. That’s my personal opinion of him.

**Interviewer:** So this is not about the type of university or anything like that.

Gemma: No. At one stage he didn't want me to go and then the next stage he did want me to go. My dad is very black and white.

**Interviewer: Did you mum want you to go to particular places and not others?**

Gemma: She's never specified. She's made sure that I've made up my own choices first and then later she would have gone "I agree with your choices" or "I would have maybe done it a bit differently" but she'd never persuade me in anyway. She's been there for support but never steered me in any direction. She's kind of laid back, which is nice.

Sophie: I think with me and my mum we're really close, so she knows exactly how I'm going to be if I go somewhere. When we went to open days and we'd get really excited about "Oh, it looks so pretty" and all this kind of thing, she'd be like "Yes, but how would you feel if you didn't make friends instantly?" So she knew how I'd feel and kept a level head on it so I could then think a lot on ... but she didn't force her own opinion on it until asked it from her, and we pretty much shared the same opinions.

**Interviewer: And did she have particular views about particular kinds of universities?**

Sophie: Not particularly. She didn't want me to go to a bad university because it was an easy option. She didn't want me to go to an easy option of anything.

**Interviewer: What's a bad university?**

**Sophie:** She just said it initially at the beginning, so I was like "Okay, I'll just look at ones I've been recommended by teachers and things like that." So she just wanted me to go somewhere that I'd feel comfortable, I'd be happy and it's a good place to go to in a whole rounded way, not just I really like the course but don't like where it is. So she wanted a rounded ... and I think that's what I've come up; with from having a level view of it all.

**Fiona:** I think for me my mum's side of the family are quite snobby because my brother and two cousins all went to Russell Groups and all did really prestigious degrees, and most of them did quite well, so they were always a bit like "Oh, why do you want to go there" but they never said "Don't." They were like "Why don't you try this one? Why don't you have a look here?" Because I was there through all the times they went to uni and for my brother I was quite young, so I saw the bad sides of it, so they put me off going to the places that they went.

**Interviewer: What do you mean by the bad side of it?**

**Fiona:** My cousin went to Birmingham and he got broken into a lot of times, and my brother lived in Bristol and he always used to moan about travel and I always remember having to go over and he always asked for money and things, and because I was quite young I didn't know about

other aspects of uni, so that was Bristol and Birmingham. I saw the bad side of them and they really put me off. And also the people they've met there, I've seen quite a lot of them recently and I'm like "Oh, I don't really want to mix with you." They're not my kind of people.

**Interviewer: In Russell Group universities?**

Fiona: I think so. I don't know if it was just the unis they went to or the degrees that they did, sort of the Law and History and things. I don't know whether ... They were all quite sort of private school people and I was just like ...

**Interviewer: Do you think your parents – not particularly violently or anything – but disagree on where you should go, or not really?**

Fiona: I think my dad would just be happy anywhere I went. Again, the opposite to Sophie where she said her mum was encouraging her to go for high end universities, like not to take the easy option, he was sort of like "Well, even if you do take the easy option, does it matter as long as you get in?" whereas I think my mum does have an opinion but in my view I don't listen to her.

**Interviewer: In relation to your parents, does the ranking of ... You've kind of raised it, but you've seen the ranking of universities, league tables and things. Do they make any difference to your family?**

**Sophie:** I think the higher ranking ones put a sparkle on them and make them more attractive in my mum's eyes, but I don't know if it's to do the whole "Oh, my daughter's going to this university" type of thing, or if it is I will get a better degree out of it or better education. I just think it makes it look more appealing rather than it is more appealing because I think it's such a personal choice, especially with me, that yes it may put a nice look to it but it may not be the university if we go there.

**Fiona:** Not so much my dad because he's gone through the whole UCAS process with me, but for my other family members they don't know that the other universities exist. All they know are the universities that are on the league table because a lot of them haven't had kids or it was a long time ago their kids went to uni, so they don't really know that they're there unless they're in ... a lot of my unis weren't and they're all a bit like "What's going on here then?"

**Interviewer:** So if they weren't top of the table ...

**Fiona:** Yes, if they weren't in the top 20 then they didn't really know.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned brothers or sisters. How did they ... So you've said about your parents. You've got brothers and sisters who went. How has he influenced how you choose? Other students have said "My brother or sister had quite a big impact one way or the other as to whether I – where I went or whether I went."



Fiona: He has because he did Chemistry and before he did it he used to really love science, and he said to me “Don’t do a subject that you 100% love inside out” because it’s made him hate Chemistry. He hates science. He has absolutely no interest in it. But he didn’t do very well in his degree but that sort of... and I wonder if that’s why he doesn’t like it anymore. He resents it for the fact he didn’t do well. Yes, he has always encouraged it. My whole family have because that side of the family, that’s the norm. You go and get your A levels, go to uni, get a job sort of thing, so it’s always been an underlying encouragement because that’s just what’s expected.

**Interviewer: You say about subject but encourage you to go to one place rather than another.**

Fiona: No, their parents have, like my parents and my aunties and stuff, but my cousins have always been like – and my brother – “As long as you’re happy with where you’re going ...”

**Interviewer: You’ve not got brothers and sisters at uni?**

Gemma: Not at uni but they did impact on me.

**Interviewer: Okay, so how did your brother, or sister, or both ...**

Gemma: Both ... My sister was going to go to uni but then she fell pregnant and over the years she’s just lost the vision, but she’s been pushing me to go

to uni, and because none of them went to uni it kind of like ... the burden falls on me to go because nobody from my side of the family has gone to uni. My brother tells me to go to uni and he hasn't even got any GCSEs, A levels or qualifications at all. My sister who's got A levels and GCSEs who didn't go to uni is now telling me to go to uni. Yes, they're all telling me to go to uni.

**Interviewer: Do they say you should go to a particular one or do a particular course?**

Gemma: They just said don't go to Portsmouth. I was like "I might be."

**Interviewer: Why do you think that is?**

Gemma: It's the rivalry.

**Interviewer: So that's not about university.**

Gemma: No, they haven't seen what ranking the universities are because I didn't bother looking at that. It's like to me a degree is a degree at the end of the day. The job you're going to, if they look at the university you've gone to then it's up to them. It's whether they like the university or not. It's going to be down to everyone's preference. I didn't bother showing them anything.

**Interviewer: What about college? How has college influenced your choices? Has it influenced your choices?**

**Gemma:** I think Middlehurst College has been really good because I've got other friends who go to other colleges and they've just left them to their own devices in effect, which is fine, but Middlehurst College has done that here but I've gone to Anne several times going "I don't know where to go" and she's always sat down and helped me out and said "These are the ones that have got your course on. Why don't you just flick through, maybe go down and have a look, and just go visiting the general areas." So I think Middlehurst College is pretty good for helping you get started when you're thrown into it thinking "Right, where do I start." They give you a little stepping stone.

**Fiona:** I didn't find them as helpful because at the end of last year I was planning on staying and doing three years, so I was just pushed into it doesn't matter about them at the moment, whereas when we came back and I changed into doing two years I slipped through the net and there was no one ... Until I found someone to help me, it wasn't offered straightaway, so I was a bit ... My UCAS went off really late because I was a bit like I had no idea what to do. I went on a summer uni school thing and if I hadn't gone on that I would have been completely lost, but then it was ...

**Interviewer: Was that Aim Higher or something like that?**

Fiona: Aim Higher, yes.

**Interviewer: Has anyone else been on ...**

Gemma: Yes, when I was younger.

**Interviewer: Did that make any difference to you?**

Gemma: I've always seen that you do A-levels and you go to uni but just because it was completely out of the norm for my normal family because my mum went to uni when she was a lot older. She was in her forties, so like me going to ... I did the tester. We did a whole week of it and I thought it was pretty fun.

**Interviewer: What about college for you?**

Sophie: I think my tutor and immediate teachers have been a great help to me on a personal level, not on a practical level. Well, they have but I think it's helped me more to have a personal level of this is what the university is actually like and this is what the feeling actually is, and much more sort of general things that you wouldn't necessarily know about if you just went on the university website or things like that, and I think that's helped me decide a lot more on what kind of university I want to go to, and especially with Middlehurst college because it's so – not relaxed but

comfortable. I feel comfy here so that I can learn better. That's the kind of university I want to go to where I feel like I fit in and I can just not worry about social things or that kind of thing. I think knowing the atmosphere I work best in has helped me pick the university's atmosphere that I think I'd work best in.

**Interviewer:** And have you ... You mentioned your tutor. Have your tutors helped you?

Fiona: My tutor did go through my personal statement, but there's been issues and I wouldn't go to him now if I needed help.

Gemma: My tutor has always been very helpful and resourceful on it.

**Interviewer:** Have your tutors influenced your choices, you know, your specific "I want to go to university A or B" have they influenced that in any way?

Sophie: I think my tutor has with me because Nicola went to Portsmouth, so she's given me really good advice about how much fun she had there and the opportunities she had, and the opportunities that she may be able to offer me. If I want to do teaching, she knows people that can put me in for work experience and things like that, so that's very appealing for me to have that sort of middle man between the university and college. It's not just a huge step up. It's I've got that buffer.

**Gemma:** My tutor hasn't really. She's left me to my own devices to pick mine.

**Interviewer:** So your tutor supported the process.

**Gemma:** Yes, she's supported the process and the aspect of going to uni, but she hasn't advised me on any universities or anything like that but my tutor is not the subjects I'm going into, so it's a bit more difficult.

**Interviewer:** And not about any general locations.

**Fiona:** My tutor, when I said "I really liked Suffolk or Ipswich" he was sort of taking the mickey and being a bit like why would you want to go there sort of thing? There's not a lot there for you. But he is really opinionated and I've learned when to listen to it and when to ignore it.

**Sophie:** It's been good to, my original options that I picked, to then get an opinion from someone who knows what they're talking about when it comes to more official bits of uni business. For instance, with Sussex, because it's Brighton I've always been sort of drawn to Brighton, so to then find out the university is really good it really came to the forefront for me.

**Interviewer:** There's some more general issues. What are the advantages of going to university?

Gemma: Experience a different chapter in life that some people don't feel is worthy enough, like they don't feel that they're worthy enough to go. To me, coming from my immediate family, it's something that's completely different to what they've done and I'm going to do it, and also it will set me up for a very long time, where they're just going to struggle.

**Interviewer: Set you up in?**

Gemma: In the way of job aspects as well.

**Interviewer: So the link to employment is important.**

Gemma: Yes.

**Interviewer: But also you're talking about a life experience as well.**

Gemma: Yes.

Sophie: Yes, I agree with the life experience. I think I'll grow up a lot. As I held back a year of college, being a year older than most of the people in my year, I really feel I need to take that step to grow up and move out, and enter the world.

Fiona: Doing an NHS course, you get signed with the Radiography Council and the job prospects are really good, especially if you want to stay in the area of your uni. You've done work experience in the hospitals, so they know you and they know if they want you or not, so for me it was just

job prospects. I don't want to get a degree and be "Oh, wow, what do I do now?" that happened to my cousin. He did his History degree and then he was a bit like "Oh, crap, what is there to do now." That scared me. I don't want to spend the money and spend the three years doing something and be a bit lost.

**Sophie:** Yes, I think it is good to pick a course that will lead you into a career or have enough options for you to do other things. So if you wanted to do more in education with it, you know, take ... do another few years on it, I think it would be good to have that option as well. Not just get the degree and go into the job. There is more options to play with.

**Interviewer:** So this link to employment and career, has choice got anything to do with employment and career? If that's important then is that changing ... the reason you choose one.

**Gemma:** I think it does, especially with mine because I'm NHS based as well with Social Work, and the Social Work Society was given to Portsmouth, and then it was taken away from Portsmouth and given to Bournemouth, so that's kind of influenced me in a way of, well, why did Portsmouth lose it? Am I better off going to Bournemouth because they seem to have been given it. They've had to accept it. Career choices ... That would set me off for life if the organisation is with them. You get more of a status.



Sophie: I'm not 100% on what I want to do after my – after I get my degree. So going to the university and seeing what careers support they have and things like that I think has helped me as well because the more support I have in that the more I'm likely to be able to make a good decision, not just a snap "Oh, this will be a good option" and not really think it through. I think so having a good support unit at a university for a career has helped me with this as well.

**Interviewer: Some research has suggested that some people choose university for excitement and pleasure, and that's why people go to university, or one of the reasons. Is that part of where you choose where to go because it's going to be a fun place?**

Fiona: It wasn't part of my original thought, but now I've been to the unis I think ... Well, especially for me because UCS is so small. It's half the size of a normal uni, so I look at it and think "Oh wow, it would be nice that you get a lot of individual attention." But I've also applied for City, which is in North London, and I think there would be so much more there to do and there would be so many more people, and especially people from outside of the uni, whereas in UCS only my ageish people are going to be there, and for that reason, like I said earlier, job prospects ... If I stay within the Ipswich area and all my friends then go off because they were uni people, I'm going to be almost back to stage one, whereas if I was in London and I got a job in London, I'd still have

people around. Also, I think if you go to uni in London you're probably more likely to stay and get a job in London, so they'd still be around.

Sophie: I think enjoyment is a big part of it because if you're not going to have that fun time part of it then it will just be too heavy in a way to be able to enjoy the university part of it because it would just get on top of you. So to be able to have the options to have some chill time and meet new people, and new hobbies, and that kind of thing, I think it is a part of it because it will just get too much otherwise, but I don't think it's the main factor.

Gemma: I've always been taught work hard first, then in summertime play. That's what I do every year. I hardly go out. I put all my friends off. The only time I see them is very rarely, and then come summertime I'm with them every day. They know that come summertime I am there for them, and it's the same with drinking. To me drinking is nice, but then you waste your money and you have a hangover, so that's not number one. That's completely down the list to right at the bottom. So to me enjoyment is important, but you're there to work and the level of work that you're going to get is going to be a lot harder because it is probably going to set you up for life. So to me it's work first, after exams go and do whatever the hell you want. That's fine. But as soon as the new academic year comes again it's work hard, but that's my way of thinking. I'm quite black and white in that.

**Interviewer:** Are some universities ... You talked about ones that are prestigious. Are some universities risky? Are there places that you don't think you'll fit in? I know you've had your individual choices, but are there ones you thought "No, I can't go to that university?"

**Gemma:** I think every uni is like that because it's a huge step in your life, and you've got to think "am I going to be able to work here, have fun here, meet people here and enjoy the overall experience." It's a huge step. Everything is changing. You're moving out. If you do move out, you're completely on your own. You've got finances to worry about. You've got deadlines, you've got work. You've got to build everything into one in such a short step.

**Sophie:** I think there's always a risk of that at any university, but for me I think it's places that I'm familiar with so that I don't have to contend with a new city, let alone new life. I think it's made certain universities less risky for me. I know Brighton because I've been there before. I know Portsmouth because I've been there for. Regardless of universities, I've been there for pleasure so I know the feel of it.

**Interviewer:** So it's whether the city is okay or not.

**Sophie:** I think it helped me.

**Fiona:** I think it's almost the opposite. The more prestigious ones are probably the less risky because say I did get into Liverpool, lots of people from all over the country, even all over the world would be going there, especially with Oxford and Cambridge. People from all over the world do travel, whereas if you're going to go to, like, say, for me, Suffolk, when I was reading it, because it was a really new uni as well, a high percentage of people in that area go to that uni, so I would feel cut off because they would know each other from college and school and maybe even primary school, and you're never going to be able to get in there and be really close friends with people that have been friends for 15 years. I think that really ... Because I looked on uni review websites, that put me off Suffolk because I thought if they all know each other how am I going to fit in with them, whereas ...

**Interviewer:** That's a different approach, yes. Okay, and are all courses equal at university? Are there some courses you think I shouldn't do that. it's not as prestigious or that's not the type of course to do.

**Gemma:** I think courses are ... They change from uni to uni, but they're marked in exactly the same way and it's a qualification at the end of the day. There will be different aspects. You can go off and you can focus on one area more than the other, but it's going to be marked in exactly the same way. It's not about what the course entails. It's about just getting through and doing it.

Fiona: Again, being an NHS course it's slightly different. If I go to a uni and all the hospitals are known for not being that brilliant or for having really high infection rates, and another hospital sees that's where I did my work experience, they might think, well, do we really ... and also the technology, if a uni is known for having really good technology then the hospital is more than likely going to be like, well, yes, they know what they're doing, whereas if the technology the unis have got is a bit old, a bit out of date, a bit old-fashioned, the hospitals are going to think, well, is it going to be worth us having them if we have to then ... not re-train her but spend time getting her up to our standard. I sort of think that would affect their choices.

**Interviewer: Are there any situations or events, is there anything when you were applying where there was an event or something that suddenly came to you that had a big impact on your choice?**

Sophie: I think the January exams have done it for me because I have to think about what is possible for me, which university is possible for me. I'm going back and forth and round and round a bit. So I think that's given me a lot more to think about because it's more realistic now, whereas before it was unknown if I could get that mark. So now it's a bit more clear to me of where I will be at the end of the year and where I will be when I go to university.

Fiona: Mine was getting my interviews, my offers, because I had two rejections and I just thought they were all going to reject me. What's the point? I was giving up with college a bit and thinking there was no point in me being here. And then all of a sudden these unis were saying "Actually, we do want you." And I started to be a bit like, well, I'd better get my arse in gear and get on with it because I do want to go to uni.

Gemma: I think my granddad because he died before my first interview and he always believed in me. He would always call me sunshine and everything. He was always the one behind me, backing me. He taught me to drive. He taught me a lot of skills and a lot of experiences I would not have had if I hadn't had him. Basically, he never pushed me into anything I didn't want to do. Like my mum, he just guided me in the way that I wanted to go. So when I said about Portsmouth, he didn't go "Oh" you know, he was really supportive, the same with Winchester and all my options. Even Solent, he said "If that's where you want to go ..." because I initially was going to have Solent as my backup. In the end they turned me down and all the others said yes, so that's kind of like, mm, okay. And the interviews ... because Solent was my first one as well and my granddad died literally two days before my interview. I was not in the best of places. I didn't tell them anything. I just went in, did my best. Oh, I got turned down. Great. That makes me feel even worse. I'm going home. But then the others afterwards said they wanted me, so the interview process does knock you into gear again.

Sophie: Yes, that's what I found.

Gemma: You push yourself that little bit extra to go "Oh, hello, I'll come to you."  
These are the grades they want. Right, I need to get that" and push yourself even harder.

Sophie: I think that was different for me because for my course you don't have interviews.

**Interviewer: Is there anything you would like to ask me? No.**

## **11.4 Appendix 4 – Interview – example transcript**

### **Interview Three – Megan**

**Okay, so this is interview three with Megan on 12/05/11. What are your final two UCAS choices?**

University of Chichester and Southampton Solent University.

**And although there are different areas that will feed into this, how did you make your final decision?**

The courses mainly and also the location.

**What do you mean by location?**

I didn't want to travel too far away from home and the better courses were actually closer to home, so it helped.

**What do you mean by better courses?**

I wanted courses with practical, not theory, because I've just spent two years doing only theory with no practical, and I want to learn to be a teacher with practical, not just writing.

**So the course is not a teaching course.**



No.

**But it's a course that ...**

It teaches you to be a teacher.

**Of your Chichester choice then, what were the most important things about Chichester?**

The coach that's there. He's an Olympic gold medallist. It's more contact time than any of the other universities with the teachers, so you get more help, and you're on placements. You go on three placements every year so you're constantly in schools.

**And if we're a bit more specific then, so what about the reputation of the university, prestige, league tables, stuff like that?**

Brilliant. It's good for sport, I think.

**So that was important.**

Yes, it was in a way.

**Because I know on your – on the original focus group you had said somewhere that you want a good reputation. I think we meant university. So you wanted a university with a good reputation.**

Yes, because it helps with you PGCE if you have gone to a good university that has a good reputation.

**Okay, and of your final list, you did have Bath. Bath also has a very good reputation, so why didn't you go for Bath?**

No practical at all. You have to pay to play sport and if you're going ... I think if you're going to do something that's going to teach you to teach PE, why should you have to pay to do sport, and it was exactly the same as college, all written work, no practical. The only way you could do practical is to do the four year option and on your third year you go to a different country for a whole year and teach sport, teach English sports to a different country, but I don't want to do that because that means risk of forgetting about riding for a whole year, and they said that can give you the best grade in your dissertation. They said it's optional but it's obviously not because the people that don't do it get a bad dissertation, so they don't get a First, so it wasn't fair on people that couldn't travel.

**So the reputation of the university is important but ...**

Not if it doesn't offer the right course.

**But course is overriding ...**

Yes.

**So you wouldn't just go to a good university just because it's got a name as a good university.**

Yes.

**So you'd like it to be a good university and you've chosen ...**

I thought it was going to be brilliant but then I got there and it was awful.

**What about ... Are the league tables important? You say Chichester is high up but**

**...**

They are, but like I didn't even look at Loughborough and that's number one in the country, but I didn't even look at those. They're not that important.

**Why not?**

Because it's an elite university, so if I wanted to do sport I wouldn't have much chance of getting in teams and stuff because they want you to be amazing, and also it's faraway and I didn't really want to go that far away because I can't come home and compete and ride and stuff.

**Isn't Bath an elite university?**

Yes, but not for sport because there's no ... There's college teams but you're paying to be in the college team. It's not like a proper homey team sort of thing. It's just like a club. It's not a proper university team, and they're all brilliant. I've watched them play and they're fantastic.

**What about the social side of university, how important is that?**

It is important, but it comes ... That's another reason why I like Chichester because you're with your class and there's only 30 of you in your class instead of 150, and you get to know them, you're friends with them and you're together a lot of the time.

**You just don't think you'd get that if it was a bigger group of people.**

You wouldn't. You'd get a few friends but that's about it.

**When you did the focus group you definitely had some worries about some aspects of social life. You were worried because you were not into partying and getting wrecked every night, to quote, and scared of being rejected for not drinking, and you thought that might mean that people thought you were boring.**

Yes, that's not going to happen.

**So you're not worried about that anymore.**

No, no.

**So you want a nice social scene but that isn't a problem at all.**

If everyone is going out and I've got an assignment to do I'd rather just stay home and do the assignment, and go out another night.

**You've said that the subject and the course are the most important things.**

Yes.

**What about the subject reputation as opposed to the overall university reputation?**

The course, there is actually a four year course which you do your PGCE during it, which is actually a better course, but I ... and everyone said "You might want to do that" and stuff, but I don't really want to because in three years' time I might want to live somewhere else and do my PGCE at a different university, so I chose the level down for teaching just because I don't know what I want to do in three years' time.

**So the practicalities of the course are the most important thing altogether.**

Yes.

**What about the atmosphere of university, how important is that?**

Oh yes, it was brilliant there.

**What made the atmosphere brilliant.**

Because it's so small. It's such a small university and you're in the same place all the time. I like being in places that are small. I wouldn't want to just be a number and not a person.

**So that's part of being individual.**

Yes.

**What about employment, is that important in terms of university choice?**

Yes, when I went for the induction she said the first thing is that this will get you into your PGCE. We have a 90% success rate of going straight from this course to your PGCE anywhere, even if it's not at that university, anywhere.

**So that again, that was a course thing, not a Chichester thing.**

Yes.

**The course gets you your PGCE, which gets you a job.**

Yes.

**And what about the facilities they've got at university?**

They don't have many. It's nothing compared to some of the others. They've got a few astro turfs, basketball courts, netball courts, but it's nothing major – no swimming pool, no nothing, so it's just ... It's what they can give you, but I would rather have that than just get lost in the crowd and not do very well because I don't know anything.

**And so you've made that choice. You've good choices and it's all looking great.**

**How much do you think you were influenced in your choice by different people?**

**What about your parents, how much did they ...**

They came with me to Chichester and Bath.

**So you went to open days.**

They both had days just for the PE students and we did ... and at Chichester I had an interview and they came to that as well, and they both preferred Chichester. They said Bath is just ... They both said the courses are horrible, and they basically helped me all the way. They said even if I do end up going to Solent they know I loved it there when I went to summer school and they wouldn't stop me.

**Have they said there are certain universities you should or shouldn't go to?**

No, they just want me to go where I'm happy.

**So they've not said "Well, this is a top one. You should think about that."**

No, they didn't care that I didn't love Loughborough because they want me to keep riding because they spend money on getting the horses as good as they can, and then I go to uni and just completely forget about them, it's just not the way to do it.

**We'll come back to some of this again a bit more to do with location. What about your brothers or sisters? You did say again in terms of family in general, when we had the focus group, you talked about your cousin, and your exact quotes "She got pregnant and expectations went out of window."**

Yes.

**And you said everyone failed to get into HE, which put the pressure on you.**

Yes.

**But you said your brother or sister weren't happy in their jobs and were very encouraging to you.**

Yes.

**So what about that, how did they influence your choice?**

My sister, she basically failed all her GCSEs because she didn't want to do them. She didn't learn or anything, so she became a hairdresser and absolutely hated it, but it was the only thing she could do, so she always said to me "Don't do it just because you can. Do whatever you can." And now she lives in Ireland and has got the perfect job and the perfect life over there because she gave up hairdressing and did what she wanted to do, and the same with my brother. He was in farming. He's really badly dyslexic, so he went to a special school but failed anyway because they don't do GCSEs like we do, and just went straight into farming but didn't enjoy it, so he moved to Australia.

**Did they ... but did your brother or sister have any input into your choices?**

Not really. They're interested in what I do but they have got no idea really. They wouldn't have a clue how to even get to university.

**What about other relatives? You said your cousin – that perhaps influenced you.**

Yes, I look at her and think "Oh my god, if I ever end up like that I'll ..." I couldn't even look myself in the face if I ever ended up like that.

**So she hasn't spoken to you about university but you ...**



She's asked me about my choices and stuff, but again she wouldn't have a clue. She hasn't got any GCSEs or anything.

**So she didn't say "I hear that's a good university" or anything like that.**

No. She didn't know that Bath was any good either.

**What about your friends because a lot of them have been applying?**

My main group of friends are just ... because friends that I have here now, at school they weren't my close friends, but all my close group of friends have gone off and done childcare or gone to Forest College or whatever, so I made friends with them and now we're really close, but they can't believe how well I've done because at school they were always cleverer than I was. We were in the same classes but I was never as good as them, but now I've done so much better and they just can't believe it because they thought they could just do it and they didn't have to work hard, whereas I worked really hard and now they're just ... and I got into all my choices and they didn't, and it's ...

**Have they influenced where you chose?**

We sort of helped each other. When we were making our choices we helped each other because we were like "Oh, that one is really good" and we sat down with each other and went through UCAS and stuff, but not because any of them are doing anything to do with PE.

**When one of you would say that one is really good ...**

You just know. As soon as you say Bath, everyone says “Oh, that one is really good because it’s ...” You just know it, don’t you? It’s like word of mouth sort of thing.

**From friends.**

From friends, yes. My family wouldn’t have a clue.

**What about peers, so a bit broader, the things people talk about in the refectory or ... No. So there’s not chatter about university with other students that you see on a day to day basis?**

I suppose if I went and talked to the people that are doing BTEC Sport, because I know quite a few of them go to Chichester as well, you know, you could talk about it, but generally I think people are more worried about it than excited at this stage at the moment.

**Worried about going away to ...**

Worried about going away, worried that they’re not going to get the grades, just ... I know my friends are worried that they’re not even going to get there because they won’t get the grades.

**People on the BTEC?**

No, people ...

**Oh, generally.**

I like doing science and horses and stuff.

**What about the college, did the college have any impact on your choices?**

The HE fair, that was brilliant.

**The HE fair at Portsmouth?**

Portsmouth, yes. That was brilliant.

**That's where there were 100 plus universities.**

That really helped because I didn't even know half the universities even existed and like I came home with so many prospectuses and stuff. That really helped, and then obviously teachers always talk to you about where you're going, what course you want to do and ... a lot of support.

**Did teachers influence your choices?**

In some ways, yes.

**How?**

The PE teachers were constantly like "This one is good and this one is good." But when they told me something like ... when they said that Bath is really good and then when I went there it wasn't, it was sort of like, well, do you really know that because you didn't go there, so you wouldn't actually know if it was good or not. My main PE teacher went to Portsmouth, so he's got a Masters from Portsmouth, but I didn't want to do Sport

Science. He told me that it was brilliant and everything but I didn't want to do Sport Science because I don't like that side of PE, so you can't really ... it's up to you what you want to do.

**And did you go on an Aim Higher or other type summer school?**

Yes, I went to Southampton Solent.

**And how did that tie in?**

That was brilliant. That's why as soon as Bath wasn't any good I was like "it's got to be Solent as my second choice."

**Because you went on the Aim Higher.**

Yes, it was just – it's fantastic there. Everything is brilliant.

**Okay, and you didn't think, well, if this is good others will be good too.**

When I went to summer school I thought ... I got really excited about going to university then because I thought it was a brilliant experience, but then when you look at different universities they're completely ... every course is just completely different. If every course was the same at every university it would be so much easier but it's so hard to pick.

**What you're coming through with again is that course is everything for you.**

Yes.

**In terms of the geography, you've said some things about not wanting to be too far away. You've also said some things about the type of place, so geography is important to you. Are you going to stay at home or move away?**

Move away.

**So you're going to move away but you're going to stay local.**

Yes, it's 45 minutes to Chichester.

**Why is that? If you move away, why don't you want to move further away?**

Because of the horses. I can't risk leaving them and risk ruining it all again.

**So it's that that's your commitment to horse riding and looking after horses.**

Yes.

**You say factors to do with Chichester, you like the fact it's quite a small place.**

Mm.

**Did you rule out other places because they were too big then?**

Loughborough. I ruled it out straightaway, and Bath. That was like the second ... After I saw the course and they said there was going to be up to 150 in our class and I was like I can't ... and you get no time with a teacher. You can't talk to them on to one. They

said you can do it by email, but it's not the same as sitting down and talking to someone about the work.

**Some people have said that one of the decisions was to do with – one of their decisions or criteria was about crime rates and things like that.**

mm-hm.

**Is that anything that's crossed your mind or your family?**

They were a bit worried about Portsmouth.

**Who were?**

Mum and dad. I said "I could live in Portsmouth" and my dad was like "Oh, you don't want to be living there." But it's really nice there.

**Because...?**

It's got a worse reputation as Southampton really. He's just being a bit of a dad.

**For what?**

I wouldn't have a clue. This is just him saying that it's got a worse reputation for crime.

**What about your mum?**

She doesn't want me to move away, to be honest.

**So that's not to do with Portsmouth and crime?**

No, that's just my dad being a dad.

**Was accommodation important?**

Yes, one of the reasons why I didn't want to choose Portsmouth is because the accommodation is ridiculously expensive. Even the worst accommodation is more expensive than some of the best accommodation at other universities. Bath is generally an expensive place to live, so costs are higher, but Chichester isn't cheap. Because I'm not prepared as a person to go in halls with a shared kitchen between 24 people and stuff, because on the Bath tour there was a shared kitchen between 12 of them and I walked in and I was disgusted by the sights and the smells, and the mould, and I couldn't live somewhere that's sharing with that many people, so at Chichester you have the houses that's just five of you. It's a bit more expensive but my loan covers just under it and then you make up the money with a job or your parents or something.

**When you talk about location, is it the university or the location? In Chichester is it Chichester you like or Chichester University?**

I like the university but a bonus was that I can come home whenever I want to because it's just a short motorway trip away.

**So if Chichester University was in a bigger city ...**

It probably would have been my second choice and Solent probably would have been my first.

**So the actual geography is quite important.**

Quite important to me, yes.

**As well as the university.**

Yes.

**I think you've mentioned this. What about student numbers in general? I know you talked about the course.**

Yes. I didn't want to be somewhere because my primary school had 14, my secondary school has 390-odd. This has got barely any. I didn't want to go somewhere where I was going to be overwhelmed with the amount of people there and not like it because you don't feel ...

**Does that go for the city as well as the university? For example, you wouldn't fancy a small university in London even if it was small?**

I don't think I'd be worried about the town, as such, because Southampton is quite ... You can get lost in the amount of people in Southampton, but I don't think that would worry me if it was a small university in a massive town because Chichester is quite a big place because obviously it's Bognor Regis as well. It's not just Chichester, so there's going to be quite a lot of people but more spread out then ...



**It's the size of university, not the town.**

Yes. That doesn't bother me.

**So what appeals is the small size of the university.**

Yes.

**And is transport important?**

Yes, I chose those two ... Well, we're pushing for me to take a car to university because transport cost, like trains and stuff, it's ridiculous the cost of it, but you can get a car if you go for a house. You can get two cars on the driveway. Obviously, if I end up going to Solent I'll be living at home so that doesn't matter.

**Some people have talked about different worries about location, so some people don't want to be too local to a place where there will be too many people from that local community because they think they might feel a bit excluded. Is that anything you've thought about?**

The only thing I have thought about is, because the houses are in Bognor Regis and I'll be learning on the Bishop Otter campus, and a lot of people from my class will probably be staying at Bishop Otter, so I might lose a few ... It might be harder for me to see them and stuff or to make more friends from Bishop Otter, but I suppose I'll have to see when I get there. And if I live in a house, generally you'll make friends with people in your house anyway.

**So you're not worried that, I don't know, for argument's sake, if there's a lot of people from Chichester you'd be excluded or anything like that?**

No.

**That's not an issue. Okay, and how much have ... Again, you've said some of this. How much have your family had an influence on the location? So you said they perhaps don't know so much about universities, but did your family have particularly strong views about going to a city, staying in the country?**

My mum doesn't. She embellishes the thought of me moving home because I do quite a lot ... she doesn't really want me to go, but obviously I'm not that far away.

**So your mum doesn't want you to leave.**

No, she hates the thought of me not being at home.

**Okay.**

But everyone else is pretty supportive. But I didn't even know, when I said to dad "Can we go to Chichester open day" I had no idea where it was. I didn't even know ... Literally, we left too early because I thought it was going to be miles away, and then when I realised it was only 45 minutes I was like "Oh." I didn't even have a clue. So no one has said "That's a bit far away" or anything because it's so close to everything.

**So your mum generally doesn't want you to be far away.**

She doesn't want me to go anywhere.

**But your dad has said "I don't like the idea of Portsmouth because there's a bit of crime."**

Yes.

**Any other places where your dad ...**

I suppose if I'd said London or something he'd have been a bit like "God."

**Did you come up with ideas and they had reactions to that?**

No, they didn't ... We worked through the prospectuses and they automatically saw Portsmouth was expensive, so they didn't like ... because they're most likely to be paying for it, so they didn't like that. Bournemouth, we come from Bournemouth so they didn't care about Bournemouth. Obviously, we live in Southampton so they didn't care about that. And then Bath, they were considering the idea of buying a place in Bath instead of me living at the university because then they could get money in later on when I've left, but they didn't mind about anything. I think if I'd have said London or if I'd said Manchester they probably would have been more worried, but because I was going less than two hours away ...

**Do you think that your decision has anything to do with worrying about finances for your family, not you but putting a burden on ...**

Yes, I did ... when they offered to pay and stuff I automatically thought ... I might have taken a gap year in between and then when the fees went up I was like definitely not because I'm not letting my parents pay like £25,000 for three years. That's not fair.

**So that ...**

I would have taken the gap year and worked and got money, but there's no way now.

**Your brother and sister weren't interested, but too remote to have said "Go for this location."**

My sister, when she came over a few weeks ago, I said "Oh, I'm going to Chichester" and she said "Where's that?"

**What about friends, did they have particular views of locations?**

No, we're going ... Well, when I said, they were like "That's close" because they're all going away, but they have no commitments. I'm the only one with a commitment.

**Your commitment to horses.**

Yes.

**Okay. And what about the college in terms of location, was there any influence there from teachers or support people on actual city location? Some people have worried that places could be too rural, too like the countryside.**

That's definitely not going to stop me, no.

**That's not going to stop you. Some people don't like that.**

In a way it's a bit annoying but it's motorway. I'd rather it was dual carriageway and country roads and stuff.

**So perhaps it being rural-ish ...**

Yes, because I'm going to have to get a new car that does motorways better.

**So you don't mind if your university is in the countryside a bit.**

In the middle of nowhere, no.

**So the fact it's small and there's a bit of countryside is okay. And you visited universities, from what you said I think you've answered it ... quite significant, the actual visits.**

Yes. If I'd just chosen Bath without visiting it I probably would have made a really wrong decision, so I'm glad I did.

**I know you rejected Winchester.**

Yes.

**You thought about Winchester at one time.**

And then I went there. I went with college.

**What was wrong with Winchester?**

It was like a prison. It was ... There was no atmosphere. It was just dead. There was nothing that said "Oh, I want to go here." Nothing interested you and everything was like ... and there was no offer to commute there. You had to stay there. They would give you no provision. The train station wasn't close to the university. It was just ... it was awkward to get to and it just wasn't ... There was nothing good about it really.

**Now you've made your choices, what do your parents think? Are they pleased with your choice?**

Yes, they're happy because I'm not going too far away, so they're pleased with that.

**You've said Winchester. Were there any universities where you just thought that's not even something I can consider. I really dislike that.**

I can't remember if there was anywhere else. Bournemouth, on my choices, it was literally to fill a gap. I wasn't even going to consider going there because it's not the best university for sport. It's got one course and that studies on golf. I hate golf. That was literally there just to fill a gap.

**So apart from Loughborough crossing your mind, all of your ... everything on your radar has been fairly close.**

Yes.

**So you haven't thought, I don't know, Bristol, or Reading, or Surrey, or Sussex, or anywhere a little bit further.**

Bath was the furthest I was willing to look at.

**Why do you think that is, because of the horses?**

It was literally just because of the horses. This year we've done so well, I don't want to go back to having to train so hard again to get back up to the level.

**And your family didn't say you should consider ...**

No. Mum wanted me to stay close because of the horses.

**Your dad didn't say "Oh, you should look further a field."**

No, he doesn't really care.

**And so in the end, what were the particular positive or negative factors in choices?**

Positive is obviously the course. That's essential. The course, the location and the homeliness of the place, they were the choices, but the negatives I was looking at was the amount of people in the classes and the contact time with the teachers.

**So that again is course. It's all about course, a lot of it.**

Mm.

**Okay, in your focus group you said a big part of HE was to get a good family name, and I think you said that a couple of times.**

Yes.

**What was that idea?**

I don't really know what I was ... family name, I'm thinking ...

**Or to get a good name for your family, is that what you mean?**

The one thing I wanted to look at was because of the becoming a teacher, it was a lot of my PE teachers have said to me that if you go to a good university you're more likely to get employed by education straightaway because the university you went to is better. I always wanted to go to a good university so that I'd automatically get into teaching, and so where I do my PGCE was really good, and looking back at my family none of them went to university. I want to start, if I do end up having a family, that they all go because I hope it's worth it when I get there.

**You thought your mum wanted you to be happy rather than pushing you too hard at university.**

Yes, definitely.

**And how do you feel about that, because you're somebody who likes being pushed hard.**

I like ... but not by my family. They don't push me at all. With my exams and stuff they've never once said "Oh, go and revise" because they know with the grades I get, they know that I'm doing what I need to do and that I'm not getting too worked up or anything. They sort of just leave me to do it by myself, but it doesn't help with them



really because they don't know anything. It's not like my parents are teachers and they could help me with my homework or anything. They've never done anything with me. Even when I was little I did it by myself, so they just sort of let me get on with my own thing.

**So looking back, is there anything else you think was quite significant in how you made your choice?**

It was literally, like when I came to college I only looked at this one because I came here and I knew that this was where I was going to be happy, and I walked into Chichester and I knew that was where I was going to be happy. I knew there was going to be no problems if I went there.

**That initial walking in when you didn't know about the course ...**

No.

**Why did you know you were going to be happy?**

Gut feeling. Same with this, gut feeling.

**Your gut feeling must be based on something.**

I wouldn't ... I don't really know. It's just where I feel like I'm going to fit in sort of thing.

**Okay, is there anything else you want to add?**

No.

**Or anything you'd like to ask.**

Not really, I can't think of anything.

**We'll stop that then. Thank you.**

## 11.5 Appendix 5 - Occupational background of participants parents

Pseudonym	Mother	Father	HE
Kate	Care Worker	Sales Assistant	-
Leah	Cleaner	Self Employed	✓
Ben	-	I.T.Tecnician	-
Joe	Secretary	Lighting Technician	-
Vicky	Learning Support Asst.	Cleaner	✓
Liam	Teaching Assistant	Insurance Administrator	-
Megan	Cleaner	Builder	-
Alice	Physiotherapist	Welder	✓
Craig	College Finance Adviser	-	-
Harriet	Unemployed	Plumber	-
Scott	Personal Assistant	Process Operator	-
David	Administrator	Technician	-
Gemma	Care Worker	Electrician	✓
Sophie	Cashier	-	-
Fiona	-	Lorry Driver	-
Gary	Housewife	Retired	-
Ryan	Receptionist	Unemployed	✓
Henry	Analyst	Electrician	-

Emily	Administrative Asst.	Construction Worker	-
Callum	Nurse	Glazier	-
Jess	Waitress	Upholsterer	-
Beth	Support Worker		✓
Paige	Care Worker	Mechanic	-
Neil	Trading Standards Officer	Boiler Maker	-
Matt	Dinner Lady	Van Driver	-
Pete	Call Centre Worker	Bank Manager	-

## **11.6 Appendix 6 – University Mission Groups**

**(Accurate as at October 2012)**

### **The Russell Group**

University of Birmingham

University of Bristol

University of Cambridge

Cardiff University

Durham University

University of Edinburgh

University of Exeter

University of Glasgow

Imperial College London

King's College London

University of Leeds

University of Liverpool

London School of Economics & Political Science

University of Manchester

Newcastle University

University of Nottingham

University of Oxford

Queen Mary, University of London

Queen's University Belfast

University of Sheffield

University of Southampton

University College London

University of Warwick

University of York

**The 1994 Group**

University of Bath

Birkbeck, University of London

University of East Anglia

University of Essex

Goldsmiths, University of London

Institute of Education, University of London

Royal Holloway, University of London

Lancaster University

University of Leicester

Loughborough University

University of Reading

University of St Andrews

School of Oriental and African Studies

University of Surrey

University of Sussex

## **University Alliance**

Bournemouth University

University of Bradford

Cardiff Metropolitan University

Coventry University

De Montfort University

University of Glamorgan

Glasgow Caledonian University

University of Hertfordshire

University of Huddersfield

Kingston University

University of Lincoln

Liverpool John Moores University

Manchester Metropolitan University

University of Wales, Newport

Northumbria University

Nottingham Trent University

Open University

Oxford Brookes University

Plymouth University

University of Portsmouth

University of Salford

Sheffield Hallam University

Teesside University

University of the West of England

**Million+ Group**

University of Abertay Dundee

Anglia Ruskin University

Bath Spa University

University of Bedfordshire

Birmingham City University

University of Bolton

Canterbury Christ Church University

University of Central Lancashire

University of Cumbria

University of Derby

University of East London

Edinburgh Napier University

University of Greenwich

Leeds Metropolitan University

London Metropolitan University

Middlesex University

University of Northampton

Staffordshire University

University of Sunderland



University of West London

University of The West of Scotland

University of Wolverhampton

## **Guild HE**

Arts University College Bournemouth

Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln

Buckinghamshire New University

Central School of Speech and Drama

Harper Adams University College

Leeds College of Art

Leeds Trinity University College

Newman University College

Norwich University College of the Arts

Ravensbourne

Rose Bruford College

Royal Agricultural College

Southampton Solent University

St. Mary's University College Belfast

St. Mary's University College Twickenham

The Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts

University College Birmingham

University College Falmouth

University College Plymouth St Mark & St John

University for the Creative Arts

University of Chichester

University of Winchester

University of Worcester

Writtle College

York St John University

### **Guild HE - Associate Members**

American InterContinental University

Anglo-European College of Chiropractic

Bradford College

Cleveland College of Art & Design

Glyndwr University / Prifysgol Glyndwr

Hereford College of Arts

Holborn College

Plymouth College of Art

Regent's College

The British School of Osteopathy

The Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust

### **The Sutton Trust 13**

Birmingham

Bristol

Cambridge

Durham

Edinburgh

Imperial

LSE

Nottingham

Oxford

St Andrews

UCL

Warwick

York

(The Sutton Trust, 2011)

### **The Sutton Trust 30**

University of Bath

University of Birmingham

University of Bristol

University of Cambridge

Cardiff University,

Durham University

University of Edinburgh

University of Exeter

University of Glasgow  
Imperial College  
King's College London  
University of Lancaster  
University of Leeds  
University of Liverpool  
London School of Economics  
University of Manchester  
University of Newcastle  
University of Nottingham  
University of Oxford  
University of Reading  
Royal Holloway University of London  
University of Sheffield  
University of Southampton  
University of St Andrews  
University of Strathclyde  
University of Surrey  
University College London  
University of Warwick  
University of York  
(The Sutton Trust, 2008)

## **11.7 Appendix 7 – Grounded Theory Coding**

### **Coding Procedures**

The following coding procedures were applied to each focus group and interview to establish emerging themes or conceptual ideas. Subsequent to coding theoretical sampling was undertaken to enable further probing of emerging themes at the later stages in the research. This involved a constant comparative method, developing emerging theoretical concepts until theoretically saturated. Finally, through the use of increasingly sophisticated analytic memos, theories were generated.

Following the completion of each focus group or interview transcripts were produced and initial codes identified. This involved looking for indications of either themes for choice or reasons for choice. Initial codes were not limited and were linked to fragments (words, lines, segments) and actions (events, contexts, viewpoints). In vivo coding was also undertaken to identify any particular terms or themes unique to particular respondents. This was particularly useful as a starting point for concerns over ‘the rural’ and ‘the provincial’.

Focussed coding was then undertaken to identify the most frequent and significant initial codes. I approached this through creating a visual representation of emerging codes and themes through producing coding maps. These suited the way I think and enabled me to see the way that codes might link to one another and identify which codes were of

significance. This also served as a crude analytic memo as the visual representation enabled me to make links between concepts and begin to formulate concepts and theories. Analytic memos were also written in a more traditional sense.

Through code mapping and memos tentative analytic categories were established. As this process was repeated after each focus group or interview it would have been easy to lose track of the links and development of such categories. Consequently data linking to particular codes, concepts and theories was collated through the use of coloured index cards. White cards were employed for initial coding, blue for focussed coding, green for axial coding and yellow for emerging analytic and theoretical concepts. After each focus group or interview more data was transcribed to cards where appropriate. Data on cards also fed back into preparation of questions for forthcoming interviews to enable the theoretical saturation of categories.

These procedures enabled me to have an overview of the codes and themes from each focus group or interview represented in a visual coding map. Overall codes, themes and developing analytical and theoretical categories were also identified on cards building a detailed picture of different areas. This approach enabled me to cross reference data. Building concepts on cards also enabled me to undertake theoretical sampling. Some questions were derived from emerging and significant categories, such as location, until completely saturated.

Later stages of theoretical development then took emerging concepts and theories and translated these into narrative explanations. These were incorporated into progress reviews and subsequently chapters in this thesis. These expand on the findings of the research, theoretical development and the examination of locational capital.





Initial coding

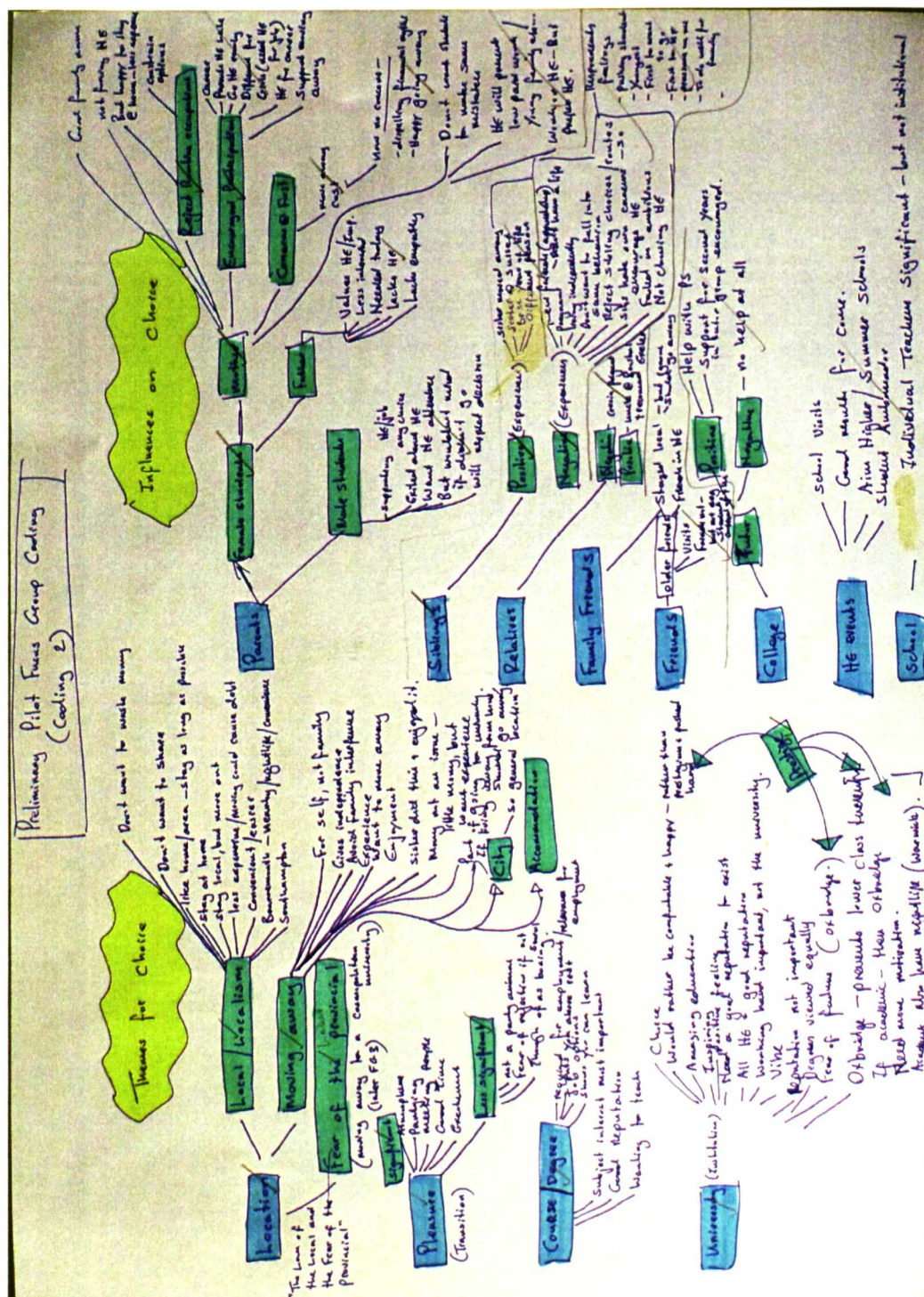
	I haven't really looked at any places to be honest.	Not looked
PW	No?	
	I'll probably go somewhere close...	-Close (location)
PW	There's no reason why you should have... I hasten to add.	
	When I was at school we went to <u>Bournemouth University</u> twice and I liked it there. It seems like a nice place and for the course I want to do they have like good results and everything for it as well. So that's probably like...	-Visiting from school - Good results for the course.
PW	What course would that be?	
	<u>Nursing</u> . That's probably like my top choice really, but <u>Southampton</u> is another choice that I have to look around at though because I don't know what it's like.	Top choice
PW	What else, what else?	
	I know I definitely want to go away. Like, I definitely want to move away from home and go to university just to get the experience of not being at home.	- I definitely want to go away. Q: Move away from home Q: Experience of not being @ home
	I'm sort of the opposite of that.	-Stage home
	Yea. I'm going to stay at home.	-Stage home
	I'm thinking about <u>Bournemouth</u> , because well they say the English course is quite good there, but it's pretty much because Bournemouth's got a really good night life...	- Go to Bournemouth because of good night life.
	Yea	- Agreement
	And it's quite nearby... that's what swings it for me really.	- Nearby
	My dad lives in <u>Bournemouth</u> as well, so if like I couldn't get home one night I could just go and stay with him. So it's pretty convenient.	- Father living in Bournemouth - "It's pretty convenient"
PW	When you say you want to move away, you want to move away from home, but do you also want to move away from the area? Is that what you mean as well?	
	It's more like to do with like independence and actually just doing it for myself, kind of rather than having like having family and stuff. I mean like I would obviously like come back and stuff for	- independence - just doing it for myself. 5 - rather than family.







### Coding ‘map’ – Preliminary Pilot Focus Group – (2)



## Preliminary Pilot Focus Group Coding

### Example of early code and theme development – Themes for Choice - Location

Themes for Choice		
		Initial Code
Location	Local/Localism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Don't waste money</li> <li>○ Don't want to share</li> <li>○ Like home area</li> <li>○ Stay at home</li> <li>○ Stay local, move out</li> <li>○ Less expensive, moving causes debt</li> <li>○ Convenient/easier</li> <li>○ Bournemouth, nearby, nightlife convenience</li> <li>○ Southampton</li> </ul>
	Moving Away	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ For self, not family</li> <li>○ Gives independence</li> <li>○ Avoid family interference</li> <li>○ Experience</li> <li>○ Want to move out</li> <li>○ Enjoyment</li> <li>○ Sister did this, and enjoyed</li> <li>○ Money not an issue, although no money</li> <li>○ Want experience</li> <li>○ Part of going to university</li> <li>○ If living away from home should move away</li> <li>○ City</li> <li>○ Accommodation</li> </ul>
	Fear of the Provincial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Moving away to a cosmopolitan university</li> </ul>

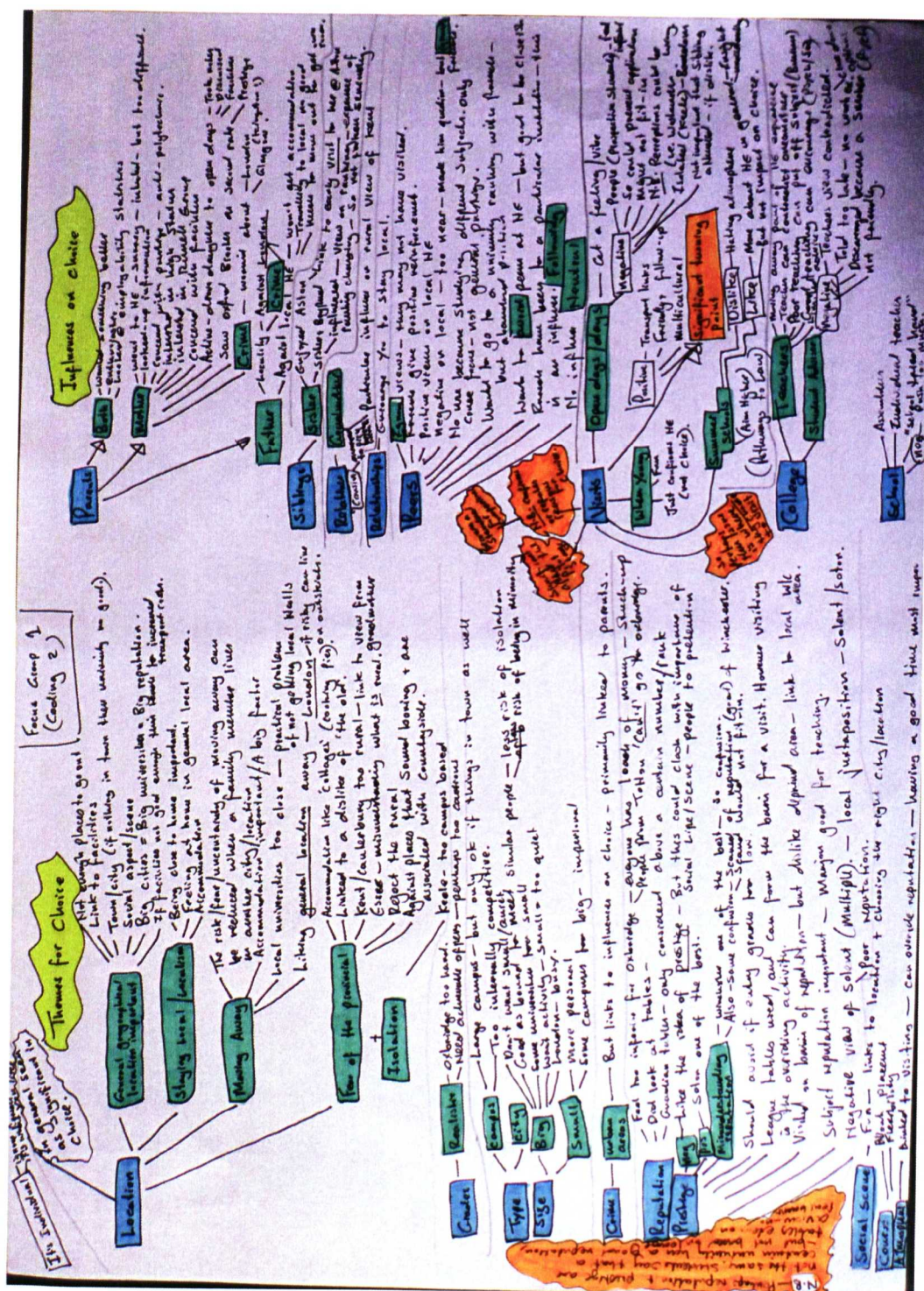














## Code development and early analytic memos

### Location - Moving Away (TFC)

FG

- A strong sense of 'independence' that is part of the university experience - includes a sense of 'self-sufficiency'. An act by the student - not their family.
- Where you can move is subject to push and pull factors - or 'limiting factors'.
- Students in general will move away, but not 'too far'.

Limitations: 'The North', The inner-city, being too close and not getting accommodation (so why move).

Attractions: • Location - i.e. The coast, The south, Facilities, A family member living in the given location - then the risk is diminished - so location more important than HEI, Accommodation, Enjoyment linked to going away.

Low risk/  
uncertainty.

• General location most significant (Geography - Not HEI)

### 'Geographical Capital' (look into 'local capital'?)

= Big impact

Knowing about places. However this is relative - respondents have a general lack of locational/geographical capital - but also fears links to a fear of provincialism - so not their own provincialism.

Link to lack of knowledge.

Existing familiarity with locality  
(?) = geographical capital

Those moving away  
are not Homogenous  
- Any route - HEI &  
Town, ~~South~~ South  
HEI atmosphere/routing

→ but a stage further means you learn from that about moving in general

✓ Perhaps w/c students need a push through sitting / familiar familiarity etc

Problem with fear of the provincial - it could mean anywhere local that not all urban conurbation



Critical Point / turning point — can diminish limitations.

If limitation is a key concept, so diminishing choice and the opportunity for prestige, then critical points where limitation is reduced becomes significant. For example: When dealing with the limitation of 'cost'. 'Putting to rest' concerns over this are significant as they open up more choices + reduce limitations.

(us). [redacted] plus her mother's her worries over how HE is [redacted] leading in relation to her sister managing cost. (in FQ)

note that discussion with an individual teacher leads her point the same concern / critical point concerning cost.

↓  
'Dispelling financial myths' — after this like a revelation — a turning point. Like a 'Turning of discovery' (see moving away?).